

NATIONAL PRESS CLUB LUNCHEON WITH
LIBERIAN PRESIDENT ELLEN JOHNSON-SIRLEAF

SUBJECT:

"THE ACCOMPLISHMENTS OF HER FIRST YEAR IN THE OFFICE, THE CHALLENGES
AHEAD AND MAKING GOOD ON HER PROMISES TO THE LIBERIAN PEOPLE"

MODERATOR: JERRY ZREMSKI, NATIONAL PRESS CLUB PRESIDENT

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MR. ZREMSKI: (Sounds gavel.) Good afternoon, and welcome to the
National Press Club. My name is Jerry Zremski, and I'm Washington
bureau chief for the Buffalo News and president of the National Press
Club.

I'd like to welcome club members and their guests in the audience
today, along with those of you viewing on C-SPAN.

We're looking forward to today's speech, and afterwards I will
ask as many questions as time permits.

Please hold your applause during the speech so we have as much
time as possible for questions. For our broadcast audience, I'd like

to explain that if you hear applause, it may be from the guests and
the members of the general public who attend our lunches, and not
necessarily from the working press. (Laughter.) (Chuckles.)

I'd now like to introduce our head table guests and ask them to
stand briefly while their names are called. From your right: Peter
Hickman of the National Press Club Newsmakers Committee and the man

most responsible for bringing our guest here today; April Ryan, White House correspondent for Urban Radio Network; Michele Bernard, a new NPC member who writes political commentaries for PBS, CNN, the O'Reilly Factor and MSNBC; Helen Thomas, White House correspondent for Hearst Newspapers who last week received the lifetime achievement award from the Washington Press Club Foundation; Senior Senator Frederick Cherue, a guest of the speaker; Frederick Douglas IV, a new NPC member who is the editor and publisher of the web site and blog www.frederickdouglasiv.org; Tokpah J. Mulbah, deputy speaker of the Liberian House of Representatives and a guest of the speaker; Melissa Charbonneau, vice chair of the NPC Speakers Committee.

Skipping over our guest for just one moment, Myron Belkind, the member of the Speakers Committee who organized today's lunch; his excellency Charles A. Minor of the Republic of Libya, the ambassador to the United States -- Liberia, I'm so sorry -- (laughter) -- Liberia. My apologies. Eleanor Clift, contributing editor to Newsweek; Mary Lou Forbes, editor of the commentary section of The Washington Times; Osita Iroegbu, legal reporter for Legal Times and the 2002 Dennis Feldman Fellowship winner; and Ershad Mahmud, a member of our International Correspondents Committee and a correspondent for the Daily Prothom Alo of Dacca, Bangladesh. (Applause.)

Ladies and gentlemen, we are honored to welcome Africa's first elected female head of state, Liberian President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, to the National Press Club. (Applause.)

Thirteen months ago today, Johnson-Sirleaf entered office vowing to rebuild her country. Founded by freed American and Caribbean slaves, Liberia was considered the jewel of West Africa in the 1970s. But then ethnic rivalries and the pursuit of plunder plunged the nation into a 14-year civil war. At least 200,000 people died.

By the time the war ended in 2003, Liberia had no national electrical grid, no national telephone network and very little running water. Rich in diamonds, timber and other natural resources, Liberia is now rated 206th out of 208 in a World Bank ranking of incomes per person.

Amid all those troubles, in November of 2005 the people of Liberia faced a choice. They could elect the Harvard-educated Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf, a former U.N. development administrator and a one-time Liberian finance minister, who had been imprisoned and exiled under earlier governments, or they could choose George Weah, a high school dropout and the nation's most famous athlete.

Nicknamed the Iron Lady, Johnson-Sirleaf took her case to the people with this slogan: "This is not the time to come and learn on the job. This is the time to come and do it, the time to perform and achieve." She won that election with 59 percent of the vote.

Now Johnson-Sirleaf likes to compare her job to that of former South African President Nelson Mandela. She, like Mandela, must work to bring about reconciliation in a long-divided country. And according to the Christian Science Monitor, this is how she reached out to supporters of the soccer star that she defeated. After attending church in a gold robe and headdress, she went to a local

soccer stadium and donned sneakers and a baseball cap. Showing off the moves that she learned as an 8-year-old girl on an all-boys team, she dribbled the soccer ball across the field. (Laughter.)

Now, this week in Washington she's had to use all of her prowess, not as a soccer player but as a diplomat, to try to persuade the United States and other donor nations to cancel Liberia's massive overseas debt. She quickly picked up the support of Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, who announced that the United States plans to cancel \$391 million in borrowing. (Scattered applause.)

The Liberian president responded by saying, "Liberia today is at one of those key moments. We are not out of the woods yet, not by a long shot, but we are convinced that Liberia can be a success story."

Ladies and gentlemen, here to tell us about her progress so far and her hopes for the future, Her Excellency President Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf.

PRESIDENT JOHNSON-SIRLEAF: (Applause.) Thank you. Thank you very much.

And let me say thank you for that great introduction and letting people know who I am.

Good afternoon to all of you. I want to thank you for being here today. It's been a big week for our country, Liberia. We think overall it's been a very successful one. We had a very productive meeting with President Bush on Wednesday, and during the course of the week we met with Secretary Rice, Secretary Paulson, Speaker Pelosi and several distinguished leaders in the U.S. Congress. The cornerstone of our week's work was our two days Partners Forum on Tuesday and Wednesday, where we met with Secretary Rice, the president of the World Bank and the African Development Bank, the managing director of the IMF, the commissioner of the European Commission, delegates from the United Nations and dozens of our partner countries around the world.

Yesterday, we had a very productive conference with a large number of private firms that I entrusted in investing and doing business in our country. Members of my team continue to do their work in meetings here in Washington and concurrent meetings on education which are now being held in New York, sponsored by UNICEF.

Our reception has been heartening. At every meeting, we received strong endorsement for our approach and powerful statements of support going forward. It means a great deal to the people of Liberia to have so many of our friends in the international community standing with us, shoulder to shoulder, as we face the challenges of rebuilding our country.

Let me highlight for you four key areas where I think we've made significant progress this week: strong endorsement of our progress and strategies going forward, new financial commitments, clear progress on debt relief and new commitments to support private investment.

First, our most important objective was to obtain an endorsement for our approach so far in our strategies going forward. We succeeded. The message was loud and clear. Our partners were clearly impressed by the progress we have made so far and were energetically supportive of our plans for the future.

They understand the enormous challenges which we face. As most of you know, Liberia was nearly destroyed by its civil war. Liberians saw their communities destroyed and their families uprooted. When we took office, there was no electricity and no water. Schools and clinics had crumbled, and roads were impassable. Institutions of governance had completely collapsed, and corruption was rampant. Many youths have been more time in war than in school. Average incomes had fallen 80 percent. Exports had collapsed. Over three-quarters of our people lived below the poverty line of one dollar per day.

The elections of 2005 were a watershed event in our history, when Liberians shouted and clearly said that they wanted an end to the suffering, they wanted to come together to build a new Liberia. We set ourselves on a course of building a nation that is peaceful, secure and prosperous, with democratic and accountable governance based on the rule of law. We set out to establish a sound economy with robust job growth and a vibrant private sector fully integrated into the global economy that gave all Liberians the basic economic opportunities they need to provide for their families.

We built our strategy on four basic pillars: enhancing peace and security; revitalizing the economy; strengthening governance and the rule of law; and rehabilitating infrastructure and delivering basic services. As we recounted to our partners, we have made significant progress in each of these areas.

To further enhance peace and security, we have completed the deactivation of 17,000 members of our former security service, and initiated recruitment for new security forces. We have placed 75,000 ex-combatants in reintegration programs, and put (36,000 ?) in formal three-year education programs. Well over 100,000 internally displaced people and refugees have returned home and into their villages over the past year. We are proud that they have decided that it's finally time for them to come home.

To rebuild our economy and revitalize it, we started by putting our financial house in order. We balanced our budget within four months and increased government revenue by 48 percent. We have completed the review of 95 contracts and concession agreements, initiated renegotiations for those which have potential for mutual benefits.

We passed a new forestry reform act that paves the way for the lifting of U.N. sanctions on our timber sector.

We reached agreement with the Arcelor Mittal steel for an iron ore concession agreement that will provide investment of over \$1 billion over a seven-year period. Similar negotiations with our long-standing partner Firestone have started this week.

To jump-start our agricultural sector, we reactivated the Central Agricultural Research Institute and distributed over 40,000 tools and 20 metric tons of seed rice to some 33,000 farmers throughout the country.

We are pleased that at the forum the United Nations announced that they will provide us with the assistance that we need to get even more seed, so that our farmers will be able to start the planting season within the next two months to be able to provide most of our staples.

As a result of all these efforts, our economy grew at 8 percent last year, providing the basis for our recovery effort.

To strengthen our systems of governance and the rule of law, we have begun to decentralize decision-making and allocate appropriate resources to local governance. We began the difficult process of civil service reform, starting by removing a large number of ghost workers from the payroll and facilitating the retirement of many long-term tenured civil servants.

We are determined to fight corruption, which has eaten away at the fabric of our nationhood and society. We have developed and begun to implement a strong anti-corruption policy and strategy. In addition to fighting tax fraud and renegotiating concession agreements, we introduced a requirement that all of us, myself included, and all cabinet members and officials, all commissioned officers, will publicly declare their assets. And we have submitted a code of conduct to our legislature that will ensure that this is subjected to judicial action.

To begin to rebuild our infrastructure and deliver basic services, we have made initial important progress on building roads, bridges, schools and clinics. One of the proudest moments of this past year was when we were able to turn lights on and turn water on in our capital city for the first time in 15 years. (Applause.)

Our children danced in the streets. Some who only knew that water came out of a bucket realized that it could come out of a tap. Today many of them, without lights in their homes, do their homework sitting on the sidewalk under the street lights.

We were able to increase school enrollment by 40 percent and provided school furniture throughout the country.

With the help of our partners, we have restored services to over 350 health facilities across the country and rehabilitated more than 20 clinics and several hospitals and health clinics, including the John F. Kennedy Referral Hospital in our capital city.

Our recent measles vaccination campaign reached 97 percent of children under 5 years old. And to fight the scourge of malaria, one of the leading killers in our country, we have distributed 125,000 mosquito nets and trained over 3,500 health workers in malaria case management. We were very pleased that President Bush included Liberia in the measles initiative which was the subject of the summit last December, and we expect that through that facility, we will be able to

do even more to fight this killer disease.

These are just some of the things we have accomplished during our first year. We think we are off to a good start, and our partners gave us a ringing endorsement of our progress. They have also expressed strong support for our plans and strategies going forward. Specifically, there was clear satisfaction with our interim poverty reduction strategy, which our partners agreed went well beyond the norms of countries in our circumstances. We are gratified that both the Liberian people and the international community are so supportive of our approach to tackle our problems.

Our second major accomplishment this week was to receive significant new financial commitments. The forum was not a pledging conference per se, and we did not set this as one of our objectives, to obtain a particular level of support. Nevertheless, we were gratified by the statement of new and continued financial support.

We have not yet added up all the commitments, as they come in different forms and over different time periods, so summing it up to a single number will take us some time. But we note in particular new commitments from the United States of around \$100 million a year and a commitment from the U.S. also to continue to support our security program -- security sector reform program to ensure that our training targets are met on time.

We also received commitments, new commitments from the World Bank -- which already has some \$80 million ongoing -- of 35 additional million each year, an exceptional one from the World Bank, as we are heavily indebted to them. And this represents grants before we have the preclearance of our arrears.

We also got from the European Commission, which already has over \$100 million in commitments, at least \$30 million a year new money going forward.

And we're glad to see that some of the countries in which our bilateral relationship had over time been discontinued, except for support for our peacekeeping and our humanitarian effort, have now come back on board. And during these meetings, Ireland committed 20 million (dollars) a year, 19 (million dollars) from the United Kingdom, 16 million (dollars) from Sweden per year. We are grateful to all of them for this show of support.

We also received commitments from the private sector. Ed Scott, the chairman of the board for the Center for Global Development, pledged a gift of 1 million (dollars) to provide support for young professionals who would come to work in our ministries. The Liberian Education Trust, which is supported by the Open Society Initiative, has already raised some \$3 million to be able to support the training of girls' education and the support for teacher training and the rehabilitation of schools. These funds, in addition to an estimated aggregate 400 million (dollars) for programs that are now ongoing, will enable us to enhance our development effort.

Third, the more important for us is the significant progress on

debt relief, one of the areas where we came here to tackle. As many of you know, our debt burden is huge, amounting to \$3.7 billion, much of it representing a tripling of the principal because of a crude interest since the debt had not been serviced over two decades.

Our three largest bilateral creditors -- the United States, Germany and the United Kingdom -- all announced that they would forgive 100 percent of the bilateral debt -- (applause) -- in the context of the HIPC process. We're particularly grateful to Secretary Rice for taking the strong leadership in this regard by making the first announcement that brought the others on board, and we expect that still others would follow in the coming weeks. These debts alone amount to over \$700 million.

In terms of the multilateral debt relief, the U.S. and several other countries expressed their commitment to work with the legislatures -- with your Congress -- to ensure that significant funds held at the IMF can be used to clear Liberia's arrears to the IMF. In the case of the U.S. alone, this could amount to more than \$150 million. The same with the African Development Bank, where the U.S. has already pledged to work with other shareholders to ensure that their debt is fully cancelled.

Fourth, at the private sector conference sponsored by the Corporate Council on Africa, OPEC and the International Finance Corporation, we were gratified to receive several new commitments to support our private sector.

Robert Johnson of, I think, BET, Black Entertainment Television, followed up on his commitment last year at the Clinton Global Initiative and announced the formation of a \$30 million fund to invest in Liberian entrepreneurs.

We signed a feasibility study with the U.S. Trade and Development Authority for our hydroelectric facility that was damaged during the years.

We signed an open skies agreement with the U.S., replacing one that had been signed in the 1960s, that eventually will open the way, once we have completed rehabilitation of our airports, for direct flights from the United States to Liberia. (Applause.)

We signed a new trade and investment framework.

The conference was oversubscribed, with 400 participants. We sent a good signal to our people. It's been a busy week, but a productive one.

It is important for all of us to remember that in the end, we are not here for numbers or signed agreements or commitment of support; we are here to help the people of Liberia to put the past behind them, to rebuild their families and their communities, to become independent and responsible members of the international community.

We still have a long way to go, but we are grateful for all the support we have received this week toward achieving these goals. Our country, Liberia, is not a poor country, just a country that has been

poorly managed. With our resources, we have said emphatically that we can move from economic free fall to a good economic performance, we can move from dependency to self-sufficiency, we can move from aid to trade.

And in all of this, the greatest satisfaction that I get and that many of us share is the hope and promise that has returned to our people. We have made our children smile again, and there's no substitute for that in all that we do.

Thank you. (Applause.)

MR. ZREMSKI: Thank you very much.

Time for questions.

PRESIDENT JOHNSON-SIRLEAF: All right.

MR. ZREMSKI: And we have a great deal of questions here.

Now, since your election, Liberia seems to be an island of tranquility in a part of the world where there is a lot of trouble these days. How can that be explained? How can that be sustained?

PRESIDENT JOHNSON-SIRLEAF: Only because Liberia has begun the process of responding to the needs of our people to give them the confidence in the future. But our peace is fragile. It is dependent right now upon a United Nations peacekeeping force which is still 13,000 persons strong. And it will depend on our ability to train our own security forces to take on this responsibility when the pressure comes, as we expect very soon, as we make progress for the peacekeeping force to leave.

We have problems in our sub-region. But we continue to work with the African leadership to ensure that those problems are resolved so that our country does not slip back into conflict, and some of our neighboring countries can find a way to peace, as we have done.

MR. ZREMSKI: Following up on that, if you could talk a little bit about the stability in the rural areas and about how advanced are the determinations on the issue of new forestry and mining concessions.

PRESIDENT JOHNSON-SIRLEAF: What's the last part? Determinations --

MR. ZREMSKI: Yeah, how solid are the new concessions on forestry and mining?

PRESIDENT JOHNSON-SIRLEAF: Again, in the rural areas we're finding the same type of slow stability return. The U.N. peacekeeping forces are deployed all over the country; they provide assistance. Increasingly as our own security forces are trained, we try to deploy them so that they can take on these responsibilities. But we say that the biggest response to security issues is to respond to the needs of the people -- to fight poverty, to give them jobs, to send their children to school, to make sure that they can go back on their farms

and produce for themselves. And that's where we've put our emphasis, on the development, as the human security will safeguard the other kinds of security that we get through arms.

MR. ZREMSKI: Many skilled and educated Liberians left the country during the presidency of Charles Taylor. What would you say to those who left the country, what would you say to them about coming back?

PRESIDENT JOHNSON-SIRLEAF: We've encouraged all of our citizens to come back home. We need their skills, we need their talents, we need their contribution. We also understand the situation that they face. Many of them have been in this and other countries for more than two decades. Many of their children were born here or born in other countries where they are citizens of this country. Many of them have contributed to the peace and the development we've experienced so far through huge amounts of remittances to their families and to their friends and associates.

We'd like to see them come. We could not absorb them all. If all of a sudden 200,000 Liberians descended on us -- (laughter) -- we wouldn't know what to do in terms of jobs and housing and all the things to which they're entitled. But we do want to see them -- as has started -- to trickle back on a voluntary basis. We hope that this country will allow them refuge as they try to make this decision and to make this transfer in a very orderly way, consistent with our ability to absorb them. But it is home and they're all welcome to come home and join in the process of national renewal.

MR. ZREMSKI: How can Liberian progressiveness spread throughout Africa?

PRESIDENT JOHNSON-SIRLEAF: I hope we started with my election. (Applause.) But also what we like to see -- Liberia is a small country -- population not more than 3.3 million, very richly endowed. Our progress as a post-conflict country, which we think will make Liberia a success story, we think will be infectious. And we think we could spread that message to many other countries that have faced conflict.

We try to follow the examples of many that have already made successes, like Mozambique and Rwanda, and we look forward to DRC being in the same situation with us. I see the ambassador right there. We hope that Liberia and DRC can become the next group to become a success story after conflict, and that this in itself would send a message to all. And I hope that the experience about self-destruction will also send a clear message to people that it is so easy to destroy and so difficult to rebuild.

MR. ZREMSKI: Members of some international development agencies believe that providing technical support is better suited for post-conflict nations than direct budgetary support. What do you believe is best for Liberia?

PRESIDENT JOHNSON-SIRLEAF: We need a bit of both. I mean, we need technical assistance to begin, because we recognize that we have

a capacity problem, given the fact that all our talents and skills left the country -- all the years of conflict. And many may know that we already adopted what is called a Governance and Economic Management Assistance Program, GEMAP, which brings into the country that have even co-signing authorities in many of our revenue-generating agencies. We welcome that because of the technical skills it brings, but ultimately we have to build our own capacity. We have to take primary responsibility for our development.

And so during the course of these two days, we said to partners, we know you needed to get the confidence in us that we would have the integrity, we would have the systems of accountability and transparency. But with this one year, if we started to get that confidence restored, and if we can build upon that, we then we like to see technical assistance begin to diminish, and our own people take full responsibility for the management of our resources.

MR. ZREMSKI: Could you elaborate a bit on the U.S. debt forgiveness and what it will mean to the economy of your country?

PRESIDENT JOHNSON-SIRLEAF: This is a very, very important element of what we can do to achieve our development goals. The U.S. is not only doing the bilateral debt -- even though it's not being serviced -- but until we can clear all of those, it means we do not have access to long-term development financing, which will be provided under IDA and other facilities. By clearing this debt, it means that we can now, instead of getting, say, from the World Bank 80 million, we could probably get 200 million if we were accessing the soft window under IDA.

And so this is very important to us.

And the fact that the U.S. has taken the leadership in this regard sends a signal to all the other countries that have been a little bit slow and reluctant to do something that Liberia now has earned, with its performance over the last year, with a staff monitoring that was successfully completed with the IMF, that the removal of that debt removes some major constraints for us to be able to wrap up our development efforts and achieve our development goals.

Q What more can the U.S. do to help Liberia get back on its feet beyond debt relief?

PRESIDENT JOHNSON-SIRLEAF: Private investment. Private investment. We'd like to see our private sector take off. The government could not even continue with new loans even if we were in the position to do so, because we don't want to see a buildup of debt once again. And so we want to see private investors.

You mentioned about concessions and contracts. We will be looking at those that did not reach the national interest test. We will renegotiate them. We'll be giving it out on a bidding process under new laws. And we hope the private sector, you know, will take the major part of this effort. That's the best thing we can do.

And we hope that the message we sent in our private-senator session the other day, telling them about the potential we have -- you

know, the minerals we have and the marine resources and the forestry resources and the agricultural resources -- that we will attract the private capital and investment in partnership with us.

MR. ZREMSKI: So far, how have your efforts to lure private investment into the country paid off?

PRESIDENT JOHNSON-SIRLEAF: It's starting to pay off. At first there had to be some reluctance. They wanted to make sure this government was serious, serious about development, serious about integrity, serious about moving the country forward, responding to the needs of the people. So we were not disappointed that in the first year there wasn't a great rush of everybody. But now the rush is on. I think they have seen in this one year how determined we are to do the right thing, to make the right decisions, to get our economy back.

And our completion of the renegotiations with Mittal Steel -- that's the largest steel company in the world, that already had an agreement with us but we thought it didn't meet our national interest

test, and we brought them back to the negotiating table and we renegotiated provisions that resulted in better benefits to our country. And they accepted that. We've now concluded that process. The ratification of that concession agreement is before our legislature, and that has sent a powerful signal to all that Liberia is not only back, we're back in business. (Scattered applause.)

MR. ZREMSKI: What initiatives are being developed to encourage tourism?

PRESIDENT JOHNSON-SIRLEAF: A tough one, given the state of our infrastructure. (Laughter.) The roads, the hotels, the lights, the water, all of those things that tourists will require for their comfort are not there yet. We need time to do that, and that's part of our agenda. We do have some great tourist spots; you know, lakes that you can wade in, falls, and mountains to climb.

But to get to them you probably have to go over some rough roads, and I'm not sure everybody's ready for that -- or sleep with a lantern in the night. (Chuckles.) I'm not sure you're ready -- (laughter) -- ready for that either. But we hope in a year we will have put a lot of our infrastructure back in place, and then we can concentrate on tourism.

MR. ZREMSKI: Now that Monrovia and its surroundings have electricity, how long do you anticipate electricity to be spread to other parts of the nation?

PRESIDENT JOHNSON-SIRLEAF: Let me first say that not all of Monrovia has electricity. (Chuckles.) We turn on some street lights. We put lights in some of the hospitals, a few offices and a few institutions at a very high cost because it's thermal generation. And when the price of petroleum -- when the price of oil goes up, we feel it. And we're getting the support for those operating costs through our partners, too. The United States, the European Commission, the World Bank.

And so we want to -- we're going into our second stage of the emergency power that will expand power to more people. What we're doing is to look at what we can do about rural electrification, see if we can use alternative sources of energy. And we've got a few suggestions and proposals on the table for biomass. We want to look at hydro on some of our streams -- many hydros that can supply some of our rural areas. It's an area that requires a lot of money, money which our budget cannot afford. And unless we can attract the support -- we hope that the study we signed this week with the U.S. to get the feasibility study for our hydro will help us. It will take us a while. It will take us a few years before we'll be able to get electricity all over the country.

MR. ZREMSKI: Has the crisis in Darfur diverted much-needed humanitarian aid from Liberia to that region?

PRESIDENT JOHNSON-SIRLEAF: As yet it's not affected us. You know, there have been other packets for Darfur, and Darfur itself has not openly welcomed a lot of aid as it should be. So far it's not affecting us, other than the sentiments we have when we see our own African brothers and sisters suffering.

If the situation there continues to worsen, it may make a difference. And perhaps in one way -- in one way, yes, it would

because as we progress, humanitarian aid from any of the nongovernmental organizations no longer fit their policies. And many of them in our health sector are already seeing that we're now progressing, we can take over our responsibility, and they must move on to the next humanitarian crisis, which would likely be Darfur. And so in that way, yes, it could begin to affect us very soon if those humanitarian agencies begin to move out.

MR. ZREMSKI: There has been increased Chinese investment in Africa. The Chinese have also been offering loans to African countries. What are your views on Chinese engagement with Africa? And should there be concern about increased debt as a result of this Chinese activity?

PRESIDENT JOHNSON-SIRLEAF: Yes, I think everybody ought to be concerned if Chinese engagement in Africa results in a debt burden of countries.

We've not reached that stage because we still have a lot of debt. We couldn't take on new debt until we've cleared our debt, in keeping with our HIPC arrangement.

What the Chinese are doing with us is mainly grants, and they're doing small things. And I must say that in one case, China and the U.S. are working cooperatively; they're both working to get our university moved to their new campus.

And so we just see them as another -- I think the basic thing will be each country has to make sure that they're fully in charge of their development agenda, that they set the tone, they set the policies, they ensure what they want China to do and what they will allow and not allow. And if a government is in full control of its

own development agenda, then they will examine and restrict and dictate the means whereby their partners take share.

Let me just remind many people who think there's competition for a small country like Liberia, that China has major investment in the United States and the United States has major investment in China. (Laughter.)

MR. ZREMSKI: You talked about your efforts to tackle the corruption issue in Liberia. I was wondering if you could talk about whether what you're doing is something other nations can learn from.

PRESIDENT JOHNSON-SIRLEAF: We hope so. Particularly as a post-conflict country, the steps we've taken to be very clear in our vision, to set our agenda. The major steps we've taken in our reform agenda -- things like fighting corruption -- are things that we believe can set an example and, you know, can establish some standards by which other countries might look at this and see if it suits their situation. We hope that if we succeed to quickly move ourselves along, that this in itself will stand out for many countries that are still in conflict and need good examples to follow.

MR. ZREMSKI: In your opinion, what is the future of former Liberian president Charles Taylor?

PRESIDENT JOHNSON-SIRLEAF: Well, the international community is handling this one. Mr. Taylor is expected to go to trial. We expect that he will be given the right of self-defense and that the rule of law will apply to him; that he -- you know, he will go through proper due process. And then we'll see what comes of that.

For Liberia, we just say that 3 million people are more important than one person, and our people wanted to put the past behind them and move on to embrace a new future.

MR. ZREMSKI: Has Nigeria's providing sanctuary to Taylor strained the relationship between Liberia and Nigeria?

PRESIDENT JOHNSON-SIRLEAF: No, not at all. We have a very strong relationship with Nigeria. President Obasanjo and I are good friends.

We talk all the time. I think he too would like to put that behind him.

MR. ZREMSKI: There is a cloud of enthusiasm back in Liberia as a result of the developments from Washington, but at the same time there is a gloomy development: the resignation of the speaker of the House of Representatives. What is your response to this news?

PRESIDENT JOHNSON-SIRLEAF: I wish I were brave enough to ask the deputy speaker to take this one. (Laughter.)

Q (Off mike.) (Laughter.)

PRESIDENT JOHNSON-SIRLEAF: No, like everything else, we think that's one of those low blips, you know, on a country in transition.

Don't expect it to be easy for us. You know, we're coming from two decades of lawlessness and indiscipline and disunity and disharmony and all the things that characterize what we represented. And so we expect that there will be lots of problems. We expect there will be dissent. We expect there will be, you know, fallouts and small pockets of conflict. For us, it's a necessary part of this transition -- a transition that involves a deep-rooted change, of fighting vested interests that have been entrenched for decades.

And so this is just one of those things. Even that shall pass away.

MR. ZREMSKI: What is the state of relations between former American slaves and native Liberians? And what is being done to encourage productive relations between them?

PRESIDENT JOHNSON-SIRLEAF: We try not to use those words anymore. (Applause.)

We want increasingly for Liberians to be Liberians, no matter what your background, no matter what your descendance.

And Americans are Americans. There is a historical linkage. We think there's a lot that can be done to use that linkage, you know, for the benefit of our people. And certainly efforts have been made in that regard. We share common values, which -- a common culture, a common history, way back.

But Liberia's an African nation. The Liberian people are Africans. And that's where they belong, and the few that may have come -- that was a long time ago. All of our children are born Liberians and born Africans, and they're proud of being that. And I think the African-American community may also be proud of their heritage and their roots, but they're Americans, just like any one of you.

MR. ZREMSKI: As the first woman president of an African nation, how will you approach some of the issues affecting females in your country, as well as the entire continent?

PRESIDENT JOHNSON-SIRLEAF: Well, for one thing, we want to see more females in important positions. And I'm glad to say that in our country and in my administration, we've got them in all the strategic roles. Women head the Finance Ministry, the Commerce Ministry, the Justice Ministry, the Youth and Sports Ministry -- (chuckles) -- the general administrator -- more importantly, for the first time in our history, a woman is head of our police. (Applause.)

There will be even more, so -- but there are other things we can do. The women that we're very concerned about is our women in the informal sector, those women that stay in the markets all day with their children working -- they're my greatest constituency. They voted for me. And my obligation to them is to improve their working conditions, and we've started to do that and we want to see them move up, not to be petty traders and small marketers all their lives but to see if we can set them on a place where they get into business and they can become, you know, strong entrepreneurs -- some of them -- and

that's what we'll be working on. We hope that this facility that comes from Bob Johnson will help us to support some of them to move up to the next layer in their business activity.

MR. ZREMSKI: How well are you accepted by your male African counterparts, given the fact that subjugation of women is still widespread in parts of the continent?

PRESIDENT JOHNSON-SIRLEAF: (Soft laughter.) I've earned my stripes. (Laughter, applause.) I've done everything they've done and more -- (laughter) -- whether it's going to prison, whether it's being exiled, whether it's waiting to be a professional both at home and abroad. I hope I'm correct in saying that they respect me for what I am and what I've done and what I stand for, and with that respect comes cooperation.

MR. ZREMSKI: What is the biggest challenge that you face as a woman president?

PRESIDENT JOHNSON-SIRLEAF: Meeting the expectations and aspirations of women in Liberia, Africa. (Laughter, applause.) I am, after all, under a microscope, and whatever I do will make a difference in whether women can move on to that next layer and open this glass cage even wider and whether they can claim, as they are all over the place, claim leadership in all spheres of society. But it places a huge burden on me and makes me humble, so I have to succeed on their behalf, and that is always mindful -- I'm always mindful of that. It's always saying, you know, you cannot fail, you've got to succeed, not just for you but for all those women out there who are counting on me. That's my greatest challenge.

MR. ZREMSKI: (Chuckles.) What do you think of the school that Oprah Winfrey has opened in Africa? Do you think it is a significant investment in girls' education?

PRESIDENT JOHNSON-SIRLEAF: Yes, I think so. I think it was a great gesture, a great action on the part of Oprah to select an African country and to open the school for girls that will train thousands of these young girls in their profession. That's a great humanitarian response on her part, and we just hope that once South Africa is off and clicking that she'll take a look west. (Laughter.)

MR. ZREMSKI: Following up on that, what is the biggest challenge today in educating Liberian girls?

PRESIDENT JOHNSON-SIRLEAF: Just getting them to stay in school. You know, young girls are not given preference. If there's no income with the family and they have to educate some of their children, traditionally boys get -- you know, get the preference. And that's why we have this special program for girls education to be able to give them the scholarships. And the response on that is coming. Making sure that -- and I tell you, a big problem -- making sure that our young girls are not subjected to rape that could take them away from their educational goals and make them mothers too soon, and thereby interrupt their schooling. We've got a tough rape law, but getting it implemented in a male-dominated judicial system is always a big problem. And so that's a challenge, to keep them in school and to

have them reach their potential through education. So yeah.

MR. ZREMSKI: Can you please speak about the state of the Liberian ship registry and your thoughts on the way it's being run?

PRESIDENT JOHNSON-SIRLEAF: The registry is run through an agency that's based here in this general area. We have some oversight responsibility -- we think not enough. We believe -- we think that the revenue that has accrued to the country over the past year does not reflect equity in those benefits, and we've made that very clear. It's a useful service to us. The agency is very competent, the agency has made sure that Liberian-registered vehicles do meet all the international standards, and we're very pleased about that. But we are going to renegotiate because the country needs to get more of those resources that they generate. And that's our aim, and we're going to get that, we think.

MR. ZREMSKI: What do you think about the U.S. occupation of Iraq? (Laughter.)

It's right here on the card! (Laughs.)

PRESIDENT JOHNSON-SIRLEAF: If it brings freedom, if it results in the emancipation of the people; if it involves the people in their takeover, in their managing their own future, then it might be perceived to be a good sacrifice for a great cause.

We don't say more than that. We don't interfere in the internal affairs of another country. But we believe in emancipation. Our own country went through that. (Applause.)

MR. ZREMSKI: Okay, we're almost out of time, and I just have a couple of quick announcements before I ask our last question.

First of all, let me remind everyone of our future speakers. On February 26th, Arnold Schwarzenegger, the governor of California, will be here with us; on the 27th, Janet Napolitano, the governor of Arizona; and on March 6th, Marc Morial, the president of the National Urban League.

Next, I'd like to present the gifts that we always give to our esteemed guests -- certificate --

PRESIDENT JOHNSON-SIRLEAF: Oh, great. Terrific. (Applause.)

MR. ZREMSKI: -- and the much-coveted National Press Club mug. (Laughter, applause.)

PRESIDENT JOHNSON-SIRLEAF: Wonderful. Thank you.

MR. ZREMSKI: Great.

PRESIDENT JOHNSON-SIRLEAF: Thank you so much.

MR. ZREMSKI: Sure. Thank you.

And our last question comes from 13-year-old Amorous(ph)

Green(ph), who asks, when you were a young girl, did you dream of becoming a president? (Laughter.)

PRESIDENT JOHNSON-SIRLEAF: No. (Laughter.)

MR. ZREMSKI: No?

PRESIDENT JOHNSON-SIRLEAF: No, I didn't have such great dreams, not when I was a young girl. I just thought I'll be like my mother, grow up to be a teacher. But life has many twists and turns, and when that twist comes and you find yourself on that curve that takes you a different road, then you grasp the moment and you seize the opportunity and you go for it. And that's what happened to me. (Applause.)

MR. ZREMSKI: Great. Thank you very much. (Inaudible.)

I'd like to thank you all for coming today. I'd also like to thank National Press Club members Melinda Cooke, Pat Nelson, Jo Anne Booze and Howard Rothman for organizing today's lunch. Also thanks to the NPC library for research. The video archive of the lunch is provided by the Press Club's broadcast operation center. Press Club members can also access free transcripts of our luncheons at our website.

Thank you very much. We're adjourned.

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