

**Talking Points: for Congressman Jesse L. Jackson, Jr. (D-IL) U.S.
House of Representatives
Center for Global Development
"The New Liberia: Initial Progress and Challenges and Opportunities
for the Future"**

Monday, February 12th - 9:00 a.m.
Jury's Hotel - Ballroom

Thank you, President Birdsall for that warm introduction. I am truly honored and humbled to once again be in the presence of Africa's first woman head of state.

INTRODUCTION

I watched with admiration and inspiration as President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf was sworn into office in January 2006. Last March, I, along with my family, met President Johnson Sirleaf when she came to address a joint session of Congress. I especially wanted my daughter Jessica to meet President Johnson Sirleaf, so she could touch history and have big dreams for her future. In May, President Johnson Sirleaf inspired hundreds of people during an electrifying trip to my hometown of Chicago.

As we shared the stage of the DuSable Museum of African American History and Culture, I realized that I had worked for years toward that day. As a member of the Foreign Operations Appropriations Subcommittee, I supported funding designed to stabilize Liberia, oust Charles Taylor and culminate in the election of President Johnson Sirleaf in late 2005. After her inauguration, I had to ensure that she had what she needed to succeed, so I was able to secure \$50 million for Liberia's infrastructure needs, but more must be done.

After two decades of dictatorship and civil war, one can't help but be deeply concerned about the fragile status of Liberia. Moreover, 85% of Liberia's population is unemployed and 75% live on less than \$1 day.

Now more than ever we need to ensure that the financial and political capital we have invested in Liberia pays off. Over the last year under the leadership of President Johnson Sirleaf, Liberia has taken the first steps on the road to recovery, but it still remains at a crucial turning point. Over the last year Liberia has made significant progress, but as President Johnson Sirleaf has acknowledged, more needs to be done. Liberia needs jobs; especially the reintegration of former combatants; basic infrastructure like electricity and roads; security to compliment and eventually replace the U.N. mission; and debt forgiveness to stimulate foreign investment and provide Liberia the ability to invest in its people.

Like last year, this year will be vital in determining whether peace and democracy prevail or whether political instability, the threat of violence, rampant corruption, and criminality

burgeon anew. Liberia's challenges are formidable, but with the help of the United States Congress, the Bush Administration and the international community, they can be surmounted.

WHY LIBERIA?

Liberia's success matters to the United States and to the world. If we can succeed in Liberia, we will have transformed a broken state, hobbled by 20 years of war, into a functioning democracy empowered by a free market economy and rule of law.

As the headlines turn away from the novelty of the first woman President of Africa, we, the United States and the rest of the world, must keep our eye on the ball. It is not the novelty that matters, but Liberia's transformation from a post-conflict country into a thriving democratic nation.

DEVELOPMENT ASSISTANCE

Liberia's people need development assistance. Unemployed youths who have known nothing but how to fire a gun, must be rehabilitated into society through jobs programs, opportunities in healthcare, education, agriculture, road work and construction.

In addition to jobs, Liberia's infrastructure needs are tremendous. Last year for the first time, electricity flowed through Monrovia. However, more needs to be done. In addition to energy needs, roads and potable water need to be provided.

SECURITY

All this development assistance is for naught unless there is continued peace and stability.

Right now the United Nations Mission in Liberia (UNIMIL) maintains the peace. There are 13,000 UN soldiers in Liberia, and we must ensure that their mandate is continued. But we must also build a Liberian force that is capable of providing stability as well as protecting Liberia's porous borders.

In the 2003 Accra Peace Accords, which cleared the way for the 2005 elections and the removal of Charles Taylor, the United States government agreed to rebuild Liberia's armed forces to a strength of 2,000 soldiers; a force that along with the national police, could eventually take the place of the United Nations peacekeepers.

The Liberia Security Sector Reform program, currently administered by the U.S. Department of State, will run out of funds in March of 2007. This will leave just one half of the Liberian recruits vetted, only 105 whom have graduated from basic training. Unless additional funding is made available, the Liberian government will have no ability to plan, much less manage, the next phase of training and deploying its security forces.

That is why I am pledging, as a Member of Congress, to support Liberia's security priorities in building a national army and national police force and in the most vital task at hand, providing for the personal protection of the President.

DEBT RELIEF

The international community must also support complete forgiveness of Liberia's \$3.7 billion debt. Without debt forgiveness, Liberia can not borrow, can not attract needed capital, and can never hope to fulfill its promise.

After one year in office, President Johnson Sirleaf continues to face numerous challenges. The country's massive debt burden severely restricts Liberia's capacity to combat poverty: the debt totals more than \$3.7 billion, however, Liberia's annual budget is less than one fortieth of that amount, and interest continues to accumulate.

How can Liberia expect to pay this back when their government revenues total \$80 million? Almost all of the debt was acquired after the 1980 coup and more than half of the interest and penalties were accrued when the previous regimes of Samuel Doe and Charles Taylor defaulted on their debt obligations.

We must urge the international community to find existing resources to eliminate Liberia's debt so that its future is not short changed. Liberia should not be held accountable for a debt that was accumulated by successive military dictatorships.

CONCLUSION

Clearly Liberia is at a turning point. With simple things such as security assistance and debt forgiveness Liberia can meet her full potential.

I am committed to making sure the U.S. Congress does everything it can and I hope those of you here this morning will speak to you elected representatives, speak with decision makers in the Bush administration and speak with the international community to ensure that Liberia is a success story.