Biographical Brief of Ellen Johnson Sirleaf

Ellen Johnson Sirleaf was born in central Monrovia in 1938 and has led a distinguished career spanning nearly four decades in the private and public domain in Liberia and internationally.

She began her career in banking and economic and financial management in 1965 at the then Treasury Department in Liberia. In 1979, as Minister of Finance of Liberia, Sirleaf spearheaded the move to curb the mismanagement of government finances. After the military coup of 1980, she served as President of the Liberian Bank for Development and Investment (LBDI), Vice President of CITICORP’s Africa Regional Office in Nairobi and Senior Loan Officer at the World Bank where she was an initial member of the World Bank Council of African Advisors. In 1985, she took a sabbatical to contest for a seat in the Liberian Senate. She was placed under house arrest and then sentenced to ten years in prison for speaking against the Samuel Doe regime. After being incarcerated for a few months, she fled to the United States and served as Vice President for Equator Bank and in 1992 she joined the UNDP as Assistant Administrator and Director of its Regional Bureau of Africa with the rank of Assistant Secretary General of the United Nations. She left that post in 1997 to run as a Presidential candidate against Charles Taylor where the official results placed her second in a field of thirteen.

In 2003 when Charles Taylor was exiled to Nigeria and the National Transitional Government of Liberia (NTGL) was formed, Sirleaf was selected to serve as Chairperson of the Governance Reform Commission where she led the country’s anti-corruption reform by changing the reporting mechanism of the General Auditing Commission from the Executive to the Legislature thereby strengthening and reinforcing its independence. She left this position to successfully contest the 2005 Presidential elections resulting in her historical inauguration on January 16, 2006, as President of Liberia.

After years of fighting for freedom, justice and equality in Liberia, spending time in jail and being forced into exile more than once, President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf is now entrusted with the most challenging task any Liberian leader has ever faced – rebuilding a post-conflict nation.

She has revived national hope and restored Liberia’s international reputation and credibility. Through her leadership, the government has identified four pillars in support of its development agenda: Peace and Security, Economic Revitalization, Governance and the Rule of Law, and Basic Infrastructure and Services.

National peace has been consolidated by the strengthening of key institutions of national security and completing the process of demilitarization, demobilization, training and reintegration of ex-combatants. All defense security units now enjoy enhanced compensation and proper pensions for retired Armed Forces of Liberia personnel have been instituted.

In addition to leading the national effort for achieving development goals, she has used her diplomatic and negotiating skills to reactivate bilateral relations with several countries including France, Germany, Canada, Israel and Italy.

Her leadership has resulted in the lifting of UN sanctions on the country’s diamond and forestry sectors and the successful renegotiation of a $1 billion concession agreement with Arcelor Mittal. Efforts are underway that will lead to relief from a $3.7 billion external debt.
Several other investment proposals for the reopening of traditional economic activities in the mining and agriculture sector are underway.

She has also been successful in attracting resources from private foundations and individuals in Europe, Canada and the United States thus supplementing Government’s resources in support of activities in infrastructure, education, and health. After she delivered speeches, several universities have provided scholarships for the training of Liberians. Her strong support for private sector endeavor has resulted in a pledge of a $31 million facility by Robert L. Johnson at the Clinton Global Initiative in which she participated.

Her strong bipartisan support from the U.S. has resulted in Liberia’s inclusion in two supplemental budgets and to her well recognized speech at a Joint Meeting of Congress. In recognition for her tireless efforts to make Liberia a post-conflict success story, Sirleaf was awarded in 2007 the coveted Presidential Medal of Freedom, the highest civilian honor bestowed by an American president.

Sirleaf has served on many advisory boards and committees. Notably among these are: International Crisis Group (USA); Songhai Financial Holdings Ltd. (Ghana); Center for Africa’s International Relations, University of Witwatersrand (South Africa); Women’s World Banking (USA); Synergos (USA) and Women Waging Peace (USA). She was a founding member of the International Institute for Women in Political Leadership and has written widely on financial issues, development and human rights.

She is the recipient of several awards including the Civil Rights Museum Award (2007); the Africa Prize for the Sustainable End of Hunger (2006); the IRI Freedom Award (2006); the David Rockefeller Leadership Bridging Award (2006) and the Common Ground Award (2006). Special honors received include Commander de l’Ordre du Mono of Togo (1996); Ralph Bunche International Leadership Award (1995); Franklin D. Roosevelt Freedom of Speech Award (1988) and the Grand Commander of the Star of Africa Redemption (1980).

She was one of the seven internationally eminent persons designated in 1999 by the OAU to investigate the Rwanda genocide, one of the five Commission Chairs for the Inter-Congolese Dialogue and one of two international experts selected by UNIFEM to investigate and report on the effect of conflict on women and women’s roles in peace building. She was the initial Chairperson of the Open Society Initiative for West Africa (OSIWA), and a visiting Professor of Governance at the Ghana Institute of Management and Public Administration (GIMPA).

Sirleaf attended the College of West Africa in Central Monrovia, and holds a Masters in Public Administration from the Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University. She has received seven Honorary Doctorate degrees from universities around the world and is founder and chief supporter of Measuagoon, a community development NGO in Liberia.

She is the proud mother of four sons and has seven grandchildren.