

Liberia: Peace and Cautious Optimism

By Ezekiel Pajibo

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The election of Ms. Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf as President of Liberia has brought a renewed sense of purpose to the small West African nation of 3.3 million people. There is a palpable attitude of “can do” among the new crop of government officials, but there is at the same time an awareness of the looming danger of unrealistic expectations. After all, the new officials, like most of the population of Liberia, are more or less pauperized as a result of not only the last 14 years of war, but also the last 25 years of misrule, abuse and corruption!

Liberia is therefore at a cross-road. There are great opportunities but the challenges are equally great. According to the statistics of the United Nations, 72% of Liberians live in poverty, while more than 50% live in “absolute” poverty. In other words, over half of the population of the country lives on less one US dollar a day; while three fourths of the population lives on less than two US dollars a day! Moreover, the unemployment rate for Liberia is approximately 85%. That figure includes many young people who are not employable, given their lack of skills. The illiteracy rate ranges from 75% to 85%.

The school system of the country was disrupted during the war years and an entire generation of Liberian youth has not been able to see the inside of a classroom! Those who had skills and who had the opportunity to leave the country during the war years did so. The conditions prevailing in the country today -- lack of education and health facilities, lack of opportunity for employment, very low wage levels (the average Liberian civil servant earns \$20 (US) a month!) -- will not entice them to return.



After years of strife, Monrovia lacks centralized electricity and water systems.

Nevertheless, the country has been offered an enormous opportunity to rebuild itself. The UN has deployed more than 15,000 peacekeepers in Liberia since October 2003. The United Nations Mission in Liberia (UNMIL, as the peacekeepers are known) has effectively policed the peace process so that there has been no renewed fighting in the last two years. The destroyed road network notwithstanding, Liberians are free to travel

Many blessings in this
Easter season.



From the AFJN staff

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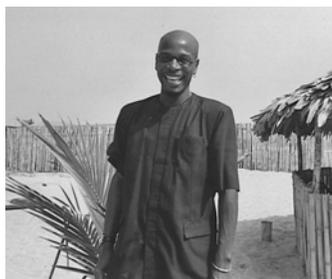
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anywhere in the country without fear of a militia attack. UNMIL successfully disarmed more than 100,000 former combatants and competently contributed to the successful holding of what has been described as the “freest and fairest election” in the country’s history.

Almost all of the government officials have been drawn from the multinational institutions such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. The new Finance Minister has worked for the Bank for the last 20 years; the Governor of the Central Bank worked for the IMF for more than 20 years. President Sirleaf worked for the Bank and for the UN Development Program. It therefore appears likely that economic programs for the country will fall into the “Washington module”, which insists on a diminished role for the state in economic management. Some believe that would be a disaster for Liberia, in particular with regard to programs aimed at poverty alleviation. The country also needs an active involvement of the state in order to address historic injustices.

Stability in Liberia is a necessary precondition for the consolidation of peace and for the building of a robust, deliberative, democratic order. Given the history of hostilities between the Liberian people and its national army, any attempt to restructure a new security apparatus, including the army, should be subjected to national debate. That is why the current effort to restructure the national army is indeed troubling. The choice by the US Department of State to award the contract for training the Liberian army to a private security firm, DYNCORP, is seriously problematic with regard to accountability and transparency. What role did the Liberian government play, in the name of its people, in deciding to have DYN-CORP train its army under a contract worth \$200 million US? What are the principles, policies and methods of DYNCORP? Are they in accord with the principles and goals of the Liberian people? Not only should investment in the restructuring of the army be a matter of public debate and participation, but it should also be matched, if not surpassed, by investment in the education and health sectors. Ignoring such essential steps in making policy for restructuring Liberia’s security does not augur well for consolidating a lasting peace.

That said, the election of Mrs. Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf as President of Liberia has provided the country a respite from war. It has offered an opportunity to begin anew. Significant international commitment, combined with real political will of the new administration, if truly harnessed to the interests of the Liberian people, could do wonders for Liberia, for Africa and for the world. Yet a certain amount of caution is necessary. International assistance is indispensable but that assistance must be in accord with the needs, aspirations and desires of the Liberian people. These needs are not at all different from the needs of other people around the world. They include personal security, opportunities to acquire skills, and affordable health care. After all, Liberians are deeply aware of the fact that only a healthy and educated citizenry, which is protected from physical violence, can build a democratic and prosperous nation.



Ezekiel Pajibo is the director of the Center for Democratic Empowerment in Monrovia, Liberia and was formerly a Policy Analyst at AFJN.

No to Dependency, Liberian leader tells U.S.

By Lacey Haussamen

Addressing a joint meeting of the United States Congress on March 15th, weeks after being elected President of Liberia, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf voiced hope that “Liberia will become a brilliant beacon, an example to Africa and the world or what the love of liberty can achieve.”

Sirleaf is the first elected female Head of State in Africa and faces many challenges in rebuilding her small West African nation, which has been torn apart by war over the last 14 years. HIV/AIDS rates have quadrupled. Central electricity is



Liberian President with George W. Bush. (Eric Draper photo)

only one example of the lacking infrastructure Teachers, books and equipment are absent from schools and Liberia owes a 3.5 billion dollar external debt.

The President thanked the American government and its people for their continuing support to Liberia. “I am deeply touched by the honor bestowed on my small but proud West African Republic of Liberia...by this invitation, you have paid one of the greatest tributes there is to those who laid down their lives for my country to be free and democratic.” She discussed the long and intertwined history of

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the two nations dating back to the establishment in 1822 of Liberia by freed slaves from America. But she added, “We ask that we continue working together but we do not ask for patronage. We do not want to continue in dependency. The benefits of your assistance must be mutual.”

Acknowledging the road will be difficult, Sirleaf said the people of Liberia and not government can save the country, “...only their own strength, their determination, their creativity, resilience and their faith can do that.” And not letting herself off the hook, “But they have the right to expect the essentials that only a government can provide.”

LISTENING AND LEARNING IN LIBERIA

By Bill Dyer

“Peace Is Flowing Like a River...” That was the hope and, in a way, the reality discussed and reflected on during the Conference on Peace Consolidation in the Mano River Basin, which took place in Monrovia, Liberia, January 23-25, 2006. The conference was held under the auspices of the

Liberian Council of Churches and the Fellowship of Christian Councils and Churches in West Africa, with the support of Church World Service (USA) and the U.S. Catholic Mission Association. Through the USCMA, the Africa Faith and Justice Network was asked to send one representative to the conference. The Catholic delegation from the U.S. included Bill Dyer, Executive Director of AFJN, Sr. Rosanne Rustemeyer and Fr. Michael Montoya of USCMA, and Fr. Bill Headley of Catholic Relief Services.

The countries in the Mano River Basin are Liberia, Sierra Leone and Guinea. While the Liberians made up the vast majority of representatives at the conference, there were also representatives from Sierra Leone and Guinea. The conference was both an ecumenical and an inter-religious effort, grouping Christians from a wide range of churches and Muslims from many different groups. All recognized the important role played by Archbishop Michael Francis in helping to bring peace to Liberia and all regretted his absence due to illness. He was represented at the conference by Fr. Andrew

Karnley, Apostolic Administrator of the Archdiocese of Monrovia.

There was no doubt to any one that, if there is to be peace in the Mano River Basin, there must be peace in each of three countries. Peace is certainly a national goal and a national reality, but it reaches beyond national borders and includes the whole region. Actually it reaches even beyond the Mano River Basin to include neighboring Cote d’Ivoire. Without peace in Cote d’Ivoire, Liberia and Guinea cannot hope to have peace. This conference clearly underlined the importance of a regional approach to issues when dealing with the countries of Africa.



AFJN Director, Bill Dyer, joined other religious for the conference on peace

It was also obvious to the participants that the religious communities were instrumental in restoring peace to Liberia. Their effectiveness came from the fact that they managed to reach beyond sectarian differences and join hands for the good of all. Risking their own lives, people of faith went into the remote areas of Liberia and took the necessary steps to disarm the militias and thus lay the foundations for a lasting peace. Finding common ground and working for the common good were essential to the success of these ecumenical and inter-religious efforts.

During the exchanges of ideas and experiences, the participants spoke with the greatest of sincerity, openness
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and even serenity. However, the atmosphere changed noticeably with the mere mention of the name of former President Charles Taylor! Some preferred not to go into too many details; others insisted on dealing exhaustively with this matter. Deeply felt emotions were expressed as signs of many painful experiences, which may never be forgotten. There were strong calls to put an end to the mentality of impunity and to inaugurate a process of justice and accountability. One could sense both the fear and the anger. Some thought it better to hold court procedures in Freetown, Sierra Leone; others preferred the Hague. They were anticipating by two months the debate which has recently appeared on the international scene! In the final analysis, those at the conference saw clearly that there could be no peace and reconciliation without justice.

Over all, there was a feeling of joy and hope among the participants, stemming from shared experiences in the past and from shared plans for the future. Their joy and their hope were contagious and filled those of us who had come from abroad to listen and learn. And yet the joy and the hope were tempered by realism, also born of those same shared experiences. There was a wise recognition of the need to avoid falling into the trap of unrealistic expectations. Nevertheless, the participants knew that reaching out, joining forces, taking risks and persevering had worked in the past and led to peace and then to elections and a new government. They seemed confident that it would also work in the future. Christians of all sorts and Muslims of all sorts, Liberians from different ethnic groups and regions had helped bring new life to a nation in strife and peril. Together they had made a difference. Together they will continue to make a difference.

Thanks to the January conference, local people and foreign guests, Christians and Muslims, could see that active commitment and mutual trust had served, and will go on serving as the ground on which “peace will flow like a river,” not only in Liberia but throughout the Mano River Basin!

Report From Ecumenical Advocacy Days 2006
“Challenging the Disparity: The Power of God—The Promise of Solidarity”

This year’s Ecumenical Advocacy Days (March 10-13) brought together in Washington, DC, nearly a thousand faithful from around the country to reflect on our moral responsibility, as committed Christians and conscientious citizens, to participate in the activities of our government. Eight different tracks gave participants a chance to learn more about their areas of interest and concern: Africa, Asia-Pacific, Latin America, Middle East, United States, economic justice, eco-justice and global security.

A large number of participants chose to follow the Africa Track, which concentrated on the devastating problem of HIV/AIDS and, in particular, on the disproportionate burden that women and children are bearing in this crisis.

Stephen Lewis, the UN Secretary General’s special envoy for HIV/AIDS in Africa spoke on the challenge of building political will to fund the fight against HIV/AIDS. He challenged the group to hold governments accountable for the promises made to the developing world. “We make a series of commitments and default on those.” Global AIDS funding needs support and the group was encouraged to “lobby tenaciously until they submit to being left alone.” At the end of the weekend, over 100 people made visits to their representatives advocating for increased funding for the global fight against HIV/AIDS (see article on next page).

Darfur Update

On March 24th, the UN Security Council unanimously voted in support of a resolution to extend the mandate of U.N. Peacekeeping Mission in Sudan (UNMIS) through September of this year. Resolution 1663 strongly condemned the activities of militias and armed groups such as the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA), which continue to attack civilians and commit human rights abuses in the Sudan.

The poorly equipped and under-financed AU force has proven ineffective in ending the violence, prompting Annan to call for its replacement by a bigger U N f o r c e .

Sudan’s government, however, has said it does not want UN troops in Darfur until a peace agreement is reached in talks taking place in Abuja, Nigeria. Progress in the peace talks has not been seen.

The Darfur Peace and Accountability Act (H.R. 3127) passed in the House by overwhelming vote (416-3) on April 4th. The Act asks that the African Union Peacekeeping Force be expanded and given a stronger mandate (including more generous logistical support). It also asserts that the International Criminal Court be assisted to bring justice to those guilty of war crimes in Darfur, Sudan.

Senate Appropriations Committee approved a \$106.5 billion supplemental spending bill, including \$173 million to help fund African Union peacekeepers in Darfur.

Support for Northern Uganda Growing

By Kathleen Mackin

The Invisible Children Movement has been on a nationwide tour giving screenings of their documentary on night commuters in northern Uganda. Created by three young filmmakers from California, *Invisible Children* packages powerful footage that provides a window into the lives of children affected by the conflict. Several screenings were hosted in the DC area, accompanied by panel discussions with experts on the conflict in northern Uganda. The screenings were well attended and raised a new awareness of the desperate and appalling humanitarian situation.

On March 8th, AFJN, along with the Congressional Human Rights Caucus and the Uganda Caucus, hosted a screening on Capitol Hill. All three of the documentary's creators were present at the event.



AFJN Associate Director, Michael Poffenberger addresses the audience at the film screening on Capitol Hill.

The following day, a Congressional briefing was held with Rep. Donald Payne (D-NJ). Panelists included representatives from the U.S. State Department and Agency for International Development, as well as Rima Salah, Deputy Director of UNICEF, John Prendergast of International Crisis Group, Jemera Rone of Human Rights Watch, and Colleen Mone-Hardy of International Rescue Committee.

The immense suffering of the people in northern Uganda, particularly those in camps, was emphasized. In addition to pointing out numerous problems to Rep. Payne, the panelists recommended several solutions. Among them were: a focus on conditions in the camps, with special attention to water availability and sanitation, better security, cross border efforts and support for diplomacy. Recently there has been an apparent increase in the international interest and response to the

crisis. In the U.S., youth around the country have been enlightened about the conflict in northern Uganda and given the tools to make a difference in the lives of people there.

On a larger scale, during his visit to Uganda, Jan Egeland, the UN Under-Secretary for Humanitarian Affairs called for more attention to be brought to the conflict in northern Uganda. This includes a special envoy to help end the conflict and a contingent of experts to examine the LRA's movements.

With optimism in the unfolding events, we must still remember the desperate humanitarian situation and the immediate need to end the continued fighting.

Kathleen Mackin is an AFJN intern.

Legislative Update on HIV/AIDS Funding

While many cuts in important health and development programs were presented in the President's 2007 fiscal year 2007 budget, global HIV/AIDS programming received a funding increase. The President's budget request for HIV/AIDS reached nearly \$4 billion, almost \$1 billion more than last year! Funding for the **Global Fund to Fight AIDS, TB and Malaria** only received \$300 million; **\$250 million less** than last year.

Senators Santorum (R-PA) and Durbin (D-IL) introduced an amendment directing an additional \$566 million to the Global Fund. With help from groups lobbying in support of it, the amendment passed on March 16. The total US contribution proposed by the Senate for fiscal year 2007 is **\$866 million**. Thanks to your hard work, hundreds of phone calls, and lots of dedication, people living with, and affected by HIV/AIDS have a better chance of accessing HIV/AIDS prevention and treatment services.

This is good news, but the Amendment was passed only by the Senate. The Senate and House versions of the Foreign Operations budget for fiscal year 2007 will have to go to Conference to find consensus amongst both chambers of Congress.

In addition, this amendment brings the U.S. contribution to only \$866 million. While this would be the largest US contribution to date, it still falls short of the \$1.2 billion the Global Fund will need in 2007 to renew its existing grants and approve new ones that will make real headway in the fight against AIDS, TB and malaria. ***This is why we still have work to do. Please call and write your Senators and Congress persons today and let them know how important global AIDS funding is. Visit www.afjn.org for more information.***

Join in Solidarity with the Children of Northern Uganda Global Night Commute, April 29th, 2006

AFJN, through its Uganda-CAN campaign, is joining Invisible Children and other organizations to gather in over 130 cities across the country to show support for the citizens of northern Uganda by demanding that our government take a stand to end the war and grave humanitarian crisis. Every night in Uganda, thousands of children leave their home out of fear of abduction and walk miles into town to sleep. For one night in America, we are asking the same of you!

Visit www.invisiblechildren.com to sign up in your city.



AFJN Happenings in brief...

Meetings:

- With staff of the Embassy of Uganda
- With members of Interaction
- OVC Taskforce (Health legislation for orphans and vulnerable children)
- With Northern Uganda Working Group

Conferences:

- U.S. Congress: speech by President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf of Liberia
- Two conferences with presentations by Nancy Pelosi and other members of Congress concerning the genocide in Darfur, Sudan
- Three day Ecumenical Advocacy Days, which focused on peace and economic justice. AFJN helped prepare the Africa track, facilitated a workshop on the D.R. Congo and staffed an exhibit
- Brookings Institution: Macroeconomic Policies in Ghana, Cameroon and other developing countries.
- Search For Common Ground: Conflict Resolution in the D.R. Congo
- Friends of the Congo: Presentations on the present situation in the D.R. Congo
- Howard University: Issues impacting contemporary Africa: trade, global warming...
- Catholic Social Ministries Gathering: Exhibit and participation in workshops
- Cato Institute: Presentation on "U.S. Foreign Policy and Humanitarian Intervention"
- THE GLOBAL CHALLENGE OF HIV/AIDS: Impact of Gender Disparities on the Growth and Spread of HIV/AIDS
- Georgetown University: Presentation on "The Genocide in Darfur and the Role of the International Com-

munity" by General Romeo Dallaire

- Cato Institute: Corruption in Kenya: A Whistleblower's Account – John Githongo
- Taught at the Georgetown Visitation Prep
- Lectured at the National Youth Leadership Forum
- Congressional Human Right Caucus Reception
- Participated in Northern Uganda discussion panels at George Mason University, George Washington University and several local churches

AFJN Sponsored Events:

- Screening of the film: "The Invisible Children" (northern Uganda), at the Capitol Building.
- Briefing at the Capitol on the situation in northern Uganda
- Panel on northern Uganda at the Hudson Institute
- Brown Bag Lunch Presentation on Darfur, by Matthew McGarry, of CRS.

Sign-on Letters:

- Southern Africa Customs Union (SACU) letter concerning trade
- Letter in support of the Obama-Brownback Bill concerning the DR Congo
- Letter ensuring 10% of overall AIDS, malaria and TB funding goes towards orphans and vulnerable children
- Letter to the Foreign Operations subcommittee in support of Global AIDS funding for PMTCT (prevention of mother to child transmission) and Pediatric Treatment
- Letter in favor of a just policy for immigrant workers
- Letter in support of increased funding for the Global Fund (HIV/AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria).

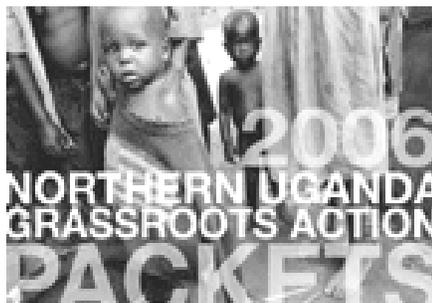
SAVE DARFUR COALITION
Rally to Stop Genocide
 April 30 2006 - Washington DC



The Rally to Stop Genocide will feature leading voices in the effort to stop the genocide in Darfur, including a broad spectrum of prominent faith leaders, political figures, human rights activists, celebrities, survivors of the Holocaust and genocides in Cambodia, Kosovo, Srebrenica, Rwanda, South Sudan and Darfur.

For more information visit www.savedarfur.org/rally

"The Rally to Stop Genocide" is organized by the Save Darfur Coalition, an alliance of more than 155 faith-based, humanitarian and human rights organizations. www.savedarfur.org



Northern Uganda Grassroots Action Packets Available online at www.UgandaCAN.org

This is a great new resource for use in communities, schools and parishes. It provides information on the situation, sample letters, petitions and more!

Africa Faith and Justice Network is a Catholic network of individual and group members focused on Africa and the experience of its people. AFJN is committed in faith to collaborate in the task of transforming United States mentality and policy on Africa. It seeks to be an instrument of education and advocacy on behalf of justice for Africa.

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Be sure to check next month's issue for Michael Poffenberger's Report From East Africa



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Advocacy for justice and peace in Africa happens only with your help and participation! Thank you for your financial support.



Oct. 3-4, 2006
AFJN Annual Conference
*AFRICA'S CHILDREN:
PERIL AND PROMISE*
University of Notre Dame

We welcome *Archbishop John Baptist Odama* of Gulu, Uganda
along with
Rev. Donald Dunson (Author of *No Room at the Table: Earth's Most Vulnerable Children*),
Sister Connie Gemme, MSOLA (trafficking of women and children)
Vicki Simon (Maryknoll Mission Associate—Street children in East Africa)
Dr. Daniel J. Towle, M.D. (Touching Tiny Lives—Children with HIV in Lesotho)

This year's conference will feature a panel discussion along with workshops facilitated by our guests on education, street children, children with HIV/AIDS, child trafficking, advocacy and campus organizing.