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Transcript

The Challenges of Post-war Reconstruction - The Liberian Experience

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HE Ellen Johnson Sirleaf:

It's good to be back in Chatham House, and a hearty good afternoon to all of you. The reception we receive here is always so welcome.

As you know, conflict still afflicts too many of our countries and we still, as nations and as an international community, have much to learn about how we move forward from conflict. The more we can share experiences, the more we can spread ideas about how to do it, how to move from conflict to peace, the more we are prepared to face these challenges, will enable us to meet our national goals. In this regard, I don't have to tell you that Liberia has some important lessons of experience.

I'd like to speak about Liberia's journey: where we started, how we have succeeded, and where we have failed. My main message is that Liberia is eight years into a two-decade process. We have cleared enormous hurdles in the past eight years, but it's the challenges that await us that perhaps are most important. We have learned lessons, we have changed the way we do things, and we have received a lot of assistance and support for the successes that we have. Liberia, like many other countries, has experienced the same catastrophe, and we all hope never to experience it again.

Liberia's Challenges

We start with the abyss that was Liberia when my government came into office. Speaking about post-war reconstruction is difficult in Liberia's case because it involved everything: the economy, security, basic services, governance, national status and national healing. What we faced was almost total destruction, and therefore the need for total reconstruction, of both state and society.

On the economic front, our problems started a long time ago. Having peaked in 1979, Liberia's GDP went into a steady decline. It went into free fall when the war started in 1989. Our GDP fell by 90 percent between 1989 and 1995 – one of the fastest drop in history. By the elections in 2005, average income was a quarter of what it had been in 1987, one-sixth of the 1979 level. In nominal terms, GDP per capita was \$160. Government revenue had fallen to less than \$80 million a year. Worst still, years of mismanagement left a colossal external debt, a result of borrowing, spending and payment defaults. Liberia's total debt in 2005 was a startling \$4.5 billion, about 800 percent of GDP.

The economic statistics are themselves disturbing, but we faced challenges perhaps more profound in other ways. More than 250,000 Liberians had been killed, and over 500,000 forced to flee their homes as internally displaced people or refugees in neighbouring countries. Families were shattered; entire communities uprooted; social, political, economic, and governance systems were destroyed; commercial and productive activities collapsed as investors fled; infrastructure was completely destroyed. More importantly, our human infrastructure was in ruins. Just a small example: we went from 800 practicing doctors in 1989 to just 50 by the year 2003. Most of our best and brightest from all professions had left the country.

Where do you start, when faced with such a daunting task? Liberia had been called the land of a thousand priorities. For a new government, the urgency and scale of the challenges could easily have been paralyzing. When we came into office, we recognized the scale of the task, and we knew that we had to act quickly to address the challenges. We executed a 150-day plan, followed by an Interim Poverty Reduction Strategy. These were essential measures to guide our actions and allow us to introduce basic measures. It gave us the breathing space that we needed to put together a proper plan.

In 2008, when we wrote our Poverty Reduction Strategy, we grouped our task into four areas, or pillars.

Our most immediate challenge was peace and security. We risked returning to conflict, as the record has showed in so many other countries, because the most fundamental component of any society – the rule of law and a basic sense of safety – had been destroyed. Thousands of non-combatants were yet to be demobilized, and the country was still home to thousands of small arms. We had no functioning army and police.

The presence of the UN peacekeeping force, UNMIL, was a decisive factor. The international community is understandably very wary of intervention in sovereign nations, and Liberia had, at one point, suffered the consequences of that caution. But the presence, since 2005, of around 10,000 soldiers – now reduced to 8,000 – guaranteed the most basic ingredient of safety for our country. A vital lesson is inherent in this: Positive intervention, even military intervention when positive, can work.

Since 2005, we have made strides in developing our own security sector. We now have a 2,000-person-strong national army, properly trained, professionalized. Liberia is no longer listed as a U.S. 'danger post' or a UN 'hardship duty station.' But we still have a lot of work to do: to expand and retrain our army, most of all to develop the police's capacity to address the

low-level crime and disorder that affect people's quality of life and their sense of safety and security. For the longer term, police and judicial reform is crucial as we plan the successor to the Poverty Reduction Strategy.

Our next challenge was to revitalize the economy. The economy was in ruins, but the stake was high. The combination of a decimated economy, lack of jobs, and a young and restless population, the lack of an open, democratic election, open democratic society, made for a cocktail of challenges. The only thing we felt that would address that, the only way our expectations went, was to ensure the resurgence of growth.

I'm glad that we can cite some of our proudest successes. As I said, we started with a \$4.5 billion external debt in 2005, a national budget of \$80 million, and a per capita GDP of \$160. Since 2005, we've raised the national budget to \$368 million. We have attracted over \$16 billion in foreign direct investment. We've been able to improve our reserves from the \$5 million inherited to over \$300 million today. Income per capita has risen by approximately one third. We have wrestled with inflation, and brought it 20 percent down to single digits, despite the 2009 global financial collapse. Our GDP has averaged 6.5 percent. Today, Liberia is projected to be one of the world's 20 fastest growing economies.

Biggest of all, and probably the achievement that we are proudest of, is our debt relief under the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) Initiative. We have been able to do this, in a three-year program, by relentlessly pursuing public financial management under a rigorous program with the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank.

The priority for our future is to create jobs. There are simply not enough jobs for our young people – although Liberia is not alone in this regard. This means more value-added, more labour-intensive industries, more small business, more vocational training, and a doubling of efforts to raise our educational standards.

Our third challenge was governance and the rule of law. The war destroyed the institutions that protect these principles. We had to rehabilitate, promote freedom of speech – the most essential right – and an idea that it could be defended and used through a free media and open courts.

The big issue in governance – one often talks about Liberia – is corruption, a perfect example of the combination of ideas and institutions. Decades of deprivation and bad governance corroded the norms and value system in our country and created a culture of rent-seeking behaviour. Battling corruption is, firstly, for us, a battle of ideas, a change of mind-set, a reform in values,

convincing people that the days of 'take all you can' are over and that it makes sense to think long-term, in terms of the impact on our agenda for growth and development. Our approach has thus had been systemic and preventive, and we have made progress.

We sought to strengthen the principle of transparency. Liberia recently became the first country in West Africa to pass a Freedom of Information Act. We also became the first country to become fully compliant with the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative. We have strengthened and reformed procurement and financial management laws, and assured higher national benefits with corporate responsibility in awarding of concessions for exploitation of our natural resources.

We sought to strengthen the principles of fairness and professionalism by increasing salaries so government employees have less incentive for graft

We tried to strengthen the principles of accountability by restructuring and strengthening our General Auditing Commission and establishing an Anti-Corruption Commission. We have submitted a Whistleblower Act to the Legislature and issued an Executive Order to protect people of conscience who want to report corruption.

As a result, recently Transparency International showed that Liberia had moved up 41 places on the Global Corruption Index. More recently, it moved 10 places, from 97 to 87, but there's more to do, especially concerning prosecution. The punishment part of fighting corruption remains a missing link. Here the challenge is enormous, and it has to do with a judiciary that has been dysfunctional for so long that it will take tremendous reforms to make it work. We therefore plan to devote our energy, in the coming months and years, to judicial reform, a review of our jury system, as well as the prosecuting powers of our institutes of integrity.

Our final pillar was to build vital infrastructure and restore the basic services of government. It almost goes without saying that our infrastructure was non-existent.

Here, again, we can count successes. We have started to rebuild roads, hospitals, clinics; we have restored lights and water – all missing in the capital city for over decades. We are now involved in trying to rehabilitate, expand and modernize our airports and our seaports, both of them so vital for the economic activity that will come out of the investment that we've been able to mobilize. A major one in this is the rehabilitation of our hydro, as power remains one of the major constraints to our desire to move into an agro-industrial state.

Finally, we had to address a country still traumatized. Our national spirit, our identity, our communal trust had been undermined. At the beginning, our partners helped us to undertake the disarmament, demobilization and reintegration of thousands of mostly young men who had no alternative – men who training and education had been bypassed, over two decades, the ones who became the child soldiers, those called, in many ways, the ‘lost generation’.

But that requires a process of national healing and reconciliation. Our process has not been perfect, nor is it complete, but we are convinced that we have made the necessary first steps in this process, and our young people are now ready to embrace the return to school, the return to training, the return to peace and the return to productive endeavour.

Lessons from Liberia

We’ve been through much, and we’ve learned many lessons, and the first lesson that was so important to us: Reconstruction that does not address the underlying causes of war will not succeed. Liberia’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission process is vital because it is intended to help to heal the wounds. But our conflict went deeper. Some of you know that it goes back to our history of inequality and exclusion between minority settlers and a majority indigenous population.

More importantly, the root cause is an economic problem. We need to address the realities of poverty, exacerbated by fourteen years of war. It is therefore not enough to achieve growth. We must grow our economy in such a way that it creates a new, fairer distribution of wealth, and sufficient access to opportunity to satisfy a population with ever greater access to information.

But above all, Liberia’s progress depends on a system which assures the peaceful transfer of power through the exercise of choice. That is why this year’s election is so important. It puts to test all the work we have done to build a strong society, an open society, a democratic society. It puts to test a public grasp of democratic principles, a multi-party system and a credible, independent judiciary. These are the sine qua non of sustainable progress in a post-conflict country.

Our second lesson of experience is that doing 80 percent is better than planning 100 percent. The Poverty Reduction Strategy was comprehensive and generated through an inclusive process. This new consultation was

essential, and our plans involved civil society throughout. This was a strong emphasis.

However, the best plans in the world are only as good as you can achieve them. And unless one realizes the limitations and capacity, you can fall short of your goals. And so, in retrospect, we know that we have to prioritize clearly, but we've learned that one needs more than that, that one needs to assess the ability, the timing, the sequencing and the capacity if you are going to achieve your goals.

Our third lesson experience is: Get the right help, and get the help right. When we set out, as I said, we had neither capacity nor our own resources. We needed some time to source and locate that capacity outside of our government, to learn from it while we were getting ourselves prepared.

We have benefited from this vital assistance. To just take the economic sphere, we worked very closely with the international institutions, particularly the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. They provided technical support to our Ministry of Finance and our Central Bank. Individuals from U.S. and other partnership countries worked long hours to strengthen our capacity and our implementation abilities.

Our fourth lesson is that in a post-conflict government, you must own the strategy and let donors follow – the ownership factor that is talked about so much. It is both a blessing and a curse to have so many organizations working with you. Analysts claim that we need more donor coordination. It is clear that major donors will coordinate with one another and with government's priorities. But how is it really possible for us to coordinate hundreds of organizations undertaking thousands of interventions in so many activities? We would need an information machinery to do that.

In truth, rather than donor coordination per se, our need is to be clear in where we are going in our goals, and focus in our determination to get there, to empower our implementing agency to form strategic partnerships in critical areas important to achieving our development goals.

Finally, our most important lesson of experience: Be patient. We were all impatient when we said to the Liberian people that we were going to make it work in six years. We've made progress, no doubt, but we're not there yet. We have misjudged some of the obstacles; we've fallen short on our implementation. We needed to understand the partnerships and processes and procedures. We feel we're on our feet, but we know that it's going to take us quite a few number of years before we are going to meet the goals that we have set for ourselves.

A Vision for Liberia's Economic Growth

We are eight years into what we call a two-decade process, and we are now about to embark on our second chapter. We are designing the successor to the Poverty Reduction Strategy, composing our National Vision to take us to the year 2030.

Liberia is moving from the first six years of stabilization to the next six years of sustained economic growth and development. That means harnessing our natural resources, transparently managing and using state resources, maximizing Liberia's comparative advantage in natural resources and agriculture, while cultivating new niches in manufacturing and services – those sectors that will ultimately create a middle class.

It means building on the gains we already have in current infrastructure reconstruction, in governance, training our people. What we say is that we are convinced, going forward, that with Liberia's natural resources and our relatively small population of 3.7 million, there is no reason why we cannot create a prosperous society, granting equal opportunity to all, under conditions of the promotion and respect for all the fundamental and human rights under the rule of law. There's no reason why we cannot build upon the successes of today to ensure that ten years from now, Liberia should no longer require foreign assistance. And by the year 2030, we should really become a middle-income country. That's our dream, that's our objective. We are convinced that we have the commitment, we have the drive, we have the ability to achieve those aims.

Thank you.

Question 1:

Actually I first heard you speak in 2006 when I was working on board the Mercy Ship Anastasis in Monrovia, so you were such an inspiration then and it's really wonderful to be able to hear you speak again. And we have partners working in Liberia, and I was asking them what I can ask you if I got the opportunity, and it's just more of a thank you than a question. It's just a thank you for your support and leadership and commitment to water and sanitation. As you've demonstrated with your Goodwill Ambassador for Water, Sanitation and Hygiene, and your recently demonstrated support of the global partnership, Sanitation and Water for All, and the Clean Water and Sanitation Compact. I'd just really like to encourage you to ensure that plan is delivered effectively and encourage you to continue to mobilise political will as you are

doing and finances to water and sanitation, especially sanitation. So thank you.

Question 2:

Thank you very much for telling us about what has been done in Liberia, which is very impressive and we have read about that as well from other commentators about Liberia. Having said that, when you talk about Liberian reconstruction and peace, the whole of Africa, there's an element that I don't think you touched in your speech and which is very important. All the conflicts in Africa: there's always an external hand.

And that is the problem. However well you do, you or your predecessor, the moment that you're in conflict or not in consonance with the foreign policy objectives of a particular country, especially the western countries, then everything will be destroyed.

Now, as in Africa, I know the situation in Africa. I don't know of a single conflict in Africa where external forces have not come to play. They've agitated against the country's peace, have employed all kinds of forces, either business... I'm sorry. I'll just make it brief. Do you think that there should be a pan-African kind of a movement or position whereby the achievements that you have detailed, Your Excellency, will be able to be sustained? Thank you.

Question 3:

Thank you. Madam President, I am very interested in the notion of national healing that you mentioned earlier. What exactly are you doing to promote national healing, and do you think the lessons you have learned can be shared by another West African country, namely Ivory Coast? Thank you.

HE Ellen Johnson Sirleaf:

I don't know of any country, not only African country, where there are not external interests. Mixing with national interests, sometimes toward the right goals, sometimes toward the wrong goal. That's part of the global reality.

You wanted to know about reconciliation. We are going to be carrying out one of the recommendations of our Truth and Reconciliation Commission for what is called the PalavaHut. That's something that's close to what you have as Gacaca in Rwanda. And what that's meant to do is to, rather than to centre on the punishment part of it, but to bring people together to be able to talk about

the experiences, the processes of contrition and forgiveness, the processes of determining what the root cause of the problem and how together, one can work together. So that particular process is going to start in a couple of months.

The lessons we have I think would be applicable to all of the countries in our immediate neighbouring states, because our conflict is common. Our problems are common. And so we hope that Ivory Coast will use the example of Sierra Leone, the example of Liberia, and will do the same. I believe President Ouattara has already said that he will be establishing such a body to try to push reconciliation among his people.

Question 4:

I want to say thank you very much to Madam President for a very illuminating speech. I was wondering if you could tell us a little bit about the inclusion of women in the post-war reconstruction efforts. I think we all know how well they did in the actual initial peace process. So I'd be interested to find out more about that.

Question 5:

Yes, thank you very much Madam President. My question is, would you like to consider putting out to the audience for responses from maybe one or two players, or to take away to think, about why the international donors don't coordinate?

And my second question, on the judiciary and your comment about getting prosecution on corruption, are you satisfied, and if not, why not, that other countries, especially western countries, EU and UK and USA, are doing enough within their civil and criminal justice systems to help Liberia and its neighbours? You probably gather from that question, I'm not convinced they are.

Question 6:

I have a two-part question. The first part is: I'd like to know with respect to foreign direct investment, what is the difference between your pitch now versus your pitch when you were first starting out in your administration?

And then the second part is, my assumption is that you now have many people that are coming and looking for opportunities in your country and I'd

like to understand more about the processes that you are looking to put in place, or advice that you would give other countries about how to disseminate to people who are more interested in developing versus more interested in taking. Thank you.

HE Ellen Johnson Sirleaf:

Women inclusion, I can't think of a better one than to head it myself. No, we have lots of women in the cabinet, in other decision-making roles and even though I've not been able to get as many as I've wanted to in high leadership positions, but we've put them in strategic places. That's beginning to work. Besides, you know the women that really provide the buoyancy for our economy are the women in the informal sector. They are the ones who go out there, do the farming, do the storing, do the marketing. So they are the ones that enable us to feed the nation.

And women were really the ones that really promoted peace and obtained the peaceful Liberia. So the participation of women in our society is quite high. Traditionally so. And will continue to be so as we now are focussing on the education of young girls to ensure that they get the retention of young adults in school, fighting things like prostitution and early pregnancy. And all that is mean to make sure that women do have equal opportunity to become professionals and to be able to be what they want to be. I believe that my own example stands out and that's a major motivation.

International donors. Their attempts at co-ordination, not just in Liberia, but all over, there's a whole effort to be able to do that, to improve the effectiveness of aid, but as you know, different external partners have different policies. They have different priorities. They must respond to their own taxpayers and what the taxpayers would like to have. So we talk about ownership and we say to all of them, 'We'd like you to be able to respect our priorities and to work toward it,' and it works in some cases.

But in other cases, there may be a little difference in where the emphasis is. And in that particular case, the only thing one can do, if that assistance is welcome, is to see how through co-ordinating mechanisms, and they're quite sophisticated ones in many of our countries, where you bring donors together, there's a pool fund concept that ensures that all funding for a particular one comes together around common programmes that have been agreed. But it continues to be an issue and continue to work at it to make it more effective.

The prosecution of those who have violated the public trust. I believe it's still more difficult in our parts of the world, particularly in Liberia, because it's so easy to compromise those whose compensation levels are inadequate. It is so easy in a society in which the institutions themselves are very weak. Now, I will not challenge your statement that in a more developed country it is equally difficult to prosecute, but maybe we hear the good ones, the sensational ones that reach our ears and we cringe and say, 'Oh, we wish our court was as fast as that.'

When we hear high level personalities in a matter of two days, they're gone before the grand jury. And they've been arraigned and are getting set, and we... It makes us very anxious as to why we can't be as fast. Why our courts will take two or three years to prosecute a case, because defence lawyers are so effective. Our judges, in the case of Liberia, our judges are not fully up to the task. We've improved the compensation level to reduce their vulnerability, but still, many years of justice going to the highest bidder is the type of thing that one has been fighting and so it makes it a bit difficult. But we're trying to make progress.

The pitch for foreign direct investment – not really different before we started and now. We have said that part of our stabilising is to take our natural resources and to invite foreign direct investment, private capital, private technology, because we lack that. We've achieved that to a large degree, but change is coming now. The change now talks about the linkages. How do we move away from the experience of enclave operations? To be able to create the sustainability so that when those resources, particularly from the extractive industries, when they have gone, that that isn't left behind.

This is why also in all of our concession agreements, we've insisted on corporate social responsibility. And that means identifying specific social services that will go back to the community in a measurable way to enable them to be sustained. So we've learned from the experience of the past in that regard and today I think we can see much more our national interest, better perspective and more benefits going to our people.

Question 7:

It's great to see you back in London, Madam President. I would like to return to a couple of things you said in your speech. Firstly, when you said it was very important to get the right help and to get the help right, looking back at GEMAP, which at the time was a very innovative and a very penetrating form

of interaction with the Government of Liberia, is there anything you would change, looking back?

Also you spoke about the importance of the help of the international community. I was wondering what your views were on the evolving role that organisations like the African Union and ECOWAS are playing in conflict prevention and conflict resolution in Africa. Thank you.

Question 8:

I'd like to ask you two questions about debt. The first, you mentioned, that Liberia has gone through the Heavily Indebted Poor Country process. But you also stressed the importance of a country owning its own development programme and donors and everyone respecting the country's ownership. Many people feel that HIPC doesn't really allow for that. That HIPC can take over sovereignty and undermine democracy. So I'd be very glad to hear about your experience of that Heavily Indebted Poor Country process and whether you feel it did undermine your own ownership of your policies.

Similarly on debt, I know that Liberia was the target of several vulture funds, and as you probably know, the British Government has just passed an act. It's now made it a permanent act – up to now it had only lasted for a year – that prevents private companies being able to buy up the debts of HIPC countries, of the countries going through the Heavily Indebted Poor Country process.

Now I know you were very anxious that Liberia's creditworthiness shouldn't be undermined by it fighting some of the debts. But also, that the vulture funds were making unreasonable demands. So I'd be very interested in your thoughts about vulture funds and what's the right way to deal with them.

Question 9:

Madam President, what do you think about the Chinese interest in Africa? And more so, considering that the circumstances in Africa, generally the same as the rural circumstances in China. Do you think there is a leaf we could borrow from China? Thank you.

HE Ellen Johnson Sirleaf:

We have seen a very satisfactory evolution of our own regional institutions, both the African Union and the Economic Community of West African States. Whereas before in the many years, there was a big talking shop where

people went and leaders made good speeches. Today is more theme focussed, it's more development issue oriented. And so we're very pleased with that evolution. More professionalism has come, not only among the leadership in Africa, but also among the staff of the regional institutions. And the whole approach has changed.

So they've been very supportive and also when it comes to intervening in support of Africa's peace initiatives, I think the evidence there is clear. In Liberia's own case, the intervention did bring us peace and they were the first to intervene before the UN came.

Today, many conflicts, whether you're dealing with so many of the countries where our countries have intervened and have taken position, we cite the case of... what happened in Niger, what happened in Guinea, have not gotten a lot of attention. But this is where military governments give up power and sorted that there are free and fair elections and turn the government over to people. In the case of Cote D'Ivoire, a regional institution accepted the fact that a non-incumbent won the election. These are major changes in what's happening with our institutions. I think they are very pleasing to many of us.

The HIPC programme does indeed impose rigorous conditions on people, particular conditions in public financial management. But these are measures that countries should take anyway, if they're going to be able to achieve the results of getting free from the dead and being able to start the process of moving their economy.

So does that undermine one's ownership? Does that undermine one's sovereignty and authority? In the short term, you may say yes, because you've committed to this programme and this programme will not allow you, for example, to have a budget deficit. It will not allow you to have profit against spending. So those are the things that constrain you, but to me these are the measures that we must design ourselves. And indeed we do design them ourselves even though they have the collaboration of the institutions, if we're going to achieve our goal. In our particular case, we were happy that we were able to do that and to do it in a record period of three years.

The vulture funds, we suffered from that too. We were taken to court. We had a 1.5 billion in commercial debt. Much of it you may say questionable debt, trade transactions, suppliers' credits, some of it banking institutions' debt. But we fought that and in the end we offered, again with the support of the partners and I must say the US Government is very helpful in the Federal Reserve to put a little bit of moral sway on some of the hedge funds. And as a result we're able to buy back our commercial debt on three cents on a dollar.

Two of the funds held out and took us to court. But what we did was to also, we got the Jubilee Club to weigh in. Bono weighed in for us. And really, we did some aggressive PR and in the end I think they thought it was better than to be the one that was in a way taking this poor country back after all the effort they had made. And I think their conscience got the better of them and they finally agreed to a settlement. So we were able to take care of that.

The Chinese. Of increasing concern to many countries, and that's because China is so aggressive that they are penetrating in a way, and their processes and their procedures are not as complicated. So they're able to move much faster, but I think we also though have reached a place of maturity in how we negotiate and so we realise that we are accountable to our people and we have a certain amount of transparency and we know that if we do not do the right things, we'll face the wrath of our people. So negotiations are open, discussions are open, our parliaments and legislatures are involved in the processes, hearings are held.

And so the Chinese have penetrated, yes, and they're making a headway. But, phew, I don't think one can say that they've been in any favoured way, or that they today are the main partners. They like big footprints. That's a big difference with them, too. Most of our traditional partners, quite rightly, want to do the small things. And the small things are necessary because that's where the real people, the grassroots people are. But the Chinese go for the footprints of large stadiums, large universities, large hospitals, and those tend to stand out and that makes them feel like they're the bigger partner.

But I don't think, can we borrow a leaf? Hard work. Modest living. They work 24 hours!

Question 10:

I had the privilege of hearing you speak shortly after you were elected at the Wilton Park conference on Security Council Resolution 1325: Women, Peace and Security. Until the question a few minutes ago, I hadn't heard you use the word women today, but I know at that time the women of Liberia were in the public eye just as the women who are being victims in other countries are in the public eye right now.

And you spoke to us very eloquently then and very positively today about the role of women in Liberia and the way forward in Liberia. But I wonder if you could offer a bit of advice to the women who are suffering in conflicts in other countries, and how they can come out of the conflict with healing and with a

way to work together to build their countries. I hope you reach your goal by 2030.

Question 11:

Quickly, say I'm proud to identify myself as a Kennedy School grad. I must say the problems in Liberia are very similar to those of Sierra Leone. I worked at the Office of the President and for a minute I thought I was listening to a Sierra Leonean president speak.

One problem that resonates is that of patience, the realisation that you have to be patient. I'm wondering how difficult it has been for you to get that message across to the average man in the street, particularly the natural George Weah followers, if you will. Many would argue that part of the reason why there's a change in government in Sierra Leone is because the government was unable to get that message across. I want to see how you would give it for the upcoming election.

Question 12:

Your Excellency, how have you set out your strategy for combating corruption? Could you be specific on your measures that you've taken, please?

HE Ellen Johnson Sirleaf:

Women involvement. They're there; they're strong; they're ready. I said they've been the ones that have really been the promoters of peace, the earners of peace for our country. And today, like women throughout Africa, they represent the sustenance of our economy. And so we've been promoting women groups. We've been getting better working conditions for women by building new markets. We've got literacy training programmes that we've started, to ensure that they're better equipped to do their businesses or making sure more girls go to school and more young women go to school. We're doing some skills training programmes for those who drop out of school to make sure that they have skills so they can pursue a profession. So women are very much involved.

The one goal that I did not include in 2030... I probably will not be able to achieve it. I wish I could have all women cabinet, but that hasn't work. I've got some ministers sitting here listening to that.

Patience, as you know, when countries come out of conflict and when a new government with good leadership and what is supposed to be good experience, good abilities, gets started, raises expectations. And so I'm sure that President Koroma faced the same thing, with raised expectations after conflict, that things are just going to move very swiftly. One has to manage those expectations. So far, things have managed to continue to talk about the process of development. It's not an event; it's a process. It takes time. Everyone has to contribute to it. It's incremental. It's progressive. It doesn't happen overnight. There's no quick fix.

One has to keep getting that message across, but the impatience is there because every time we build a new road, there are two or three other communities in a remote area that will say, 'Where's our road?' Every time we turn on lights in a community, there are other communities that are dark that say, 'Why aren't you fair to us? Why do you give these lights and not us?' And we have to say, 'It takes time to decide the training, to design the infrastructure.' So as I say, it's just a matter of managing it.

Strategy for corruption. We've tried to outline some basic things. One: better compensation to reduce vulnerabilities. Institutions, building the institutions. The pillars of integrity. Those are the auditing commissions, the Anti-Corruption Commission, if that is necessary. Systems, in our country where there were no systems. Everything was by discretion; everything was so that you made it easy for one to abuse the system and to go afar of it.

Capacity. Most times, we inherited people in the civil service who really were people who were rewardees from the war infraction. Their whole mindset, quite different, you know. Their abilities to understand procurement laws and whatnot; again a process of training them to do that. The laws and the strategy, changing the laws. Those are all that, and then punishment.

So to me, it's a combination of all this. You will notice that four of the five things I mentioned are preventive measures, underlying the simple fact that prevention is better than cure. The cure is the punishment, and it's an important part. You have to do that also to send a signal to everybody that if you violate the public trust, there is a penalty to be had.

But one cannot do that in isolation from the other things, if you want to have a sustainability and a permanent way of attacking corruption. Those things, change takes time. Changing the value system takes time. When something becomes a way of life and it becomes a part of the culture, because there's no way to survive, then you have to attack it in a multi-faceted way. That was

what we tried to do, but in the short run, you don't get the quick results you want.

What the public wants and sometimes I want it too, is every time somebody is wrongly or rightly charged with corruption, is to grab them and throw them in jail. That has to happen from some time if you're going to send that strong message. But if we were to apply that generally, we'd probably throw thousands and thousands of people in jail. So we think we're making progress. We're heading on this last one now, the punishment, and trying to attack it in a way where it will be permanent and where it will not just be a hit or miss, or one sensational case here or there.