



REALITY CHECK

DIVERSE VOICES ON INTERNAL CONFLICT

The Fund for Peace

“Building Peace in the 21st Century”

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Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf was a leading candidate in the 1997 Liberian special elections. She came in second to Charles Taylor, the current President. She first entered politics in the 1970s as a cabinet member, the minister of finance, under President William Tolbert. Johnson-Sirleaf became a prominent opposition figure in a 1985 senatorial campaign, when she openly criticized the country's military leader, Samuel Doe. She was sentenced to ten years imprisonment for her dissidence and eventually had to flee into exile. Trained in public administration, she has worked in the international financial sector for Citibank and as a senior official for the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) and the World Bank. She returned to Liberia as the Unity Party candidate in the 1997 presidential election. Exiled again for her political opposition after the election, she has remained a powerful voice for reform and change in Liberian politics.

FfP: You have said that Africans must take the responsibility for freeing themselves. What do you mean?

I believe that all African countries need to have open societies in which fundamental freedoms -- speech, religion and association -- can be fully enjoyed. We need an environment in which Africans can pursue any peaceful and legal endeavor to reach their full potential. And the primary responsibility for achieving that has to come from Africans themselves within their own societies, nations, and regions. We must stand up for personal liberties, speaking out individually and collectively. We

must have the laws and policies that permit freedom and we must build institutions that enforce respect for freedom. Too often we suffer in silence because of fear. We must get beyond fear, which is exactly what is going on in many African countries by many courageous people and organizations. We need to do more, with the hope that friendly outside nations will support our efforts to gain freedom.



FfP: How strong is the sense of African identity?

We are struggling to maintain the identity that was forged during the liberation wars. With independence in the 1960s, you were proud to be an African. Nationalism was high. We had overcome colonialism and slavery. We could be proud of being ourselves. Recently, because of economic setbacks and conflict, we have had a lot of Africans leaving. As a result of the brain drain, we have a whole new situation in which too many African children are born outside their own countries, in the United States, in Europe or in other African countries. We have to regain that identity that was so strong following independence. We must attract

back all those currently in the diaspora. We have slipped in economic development, but we still have the basis to regain and to move ahead at an accelerated pace. We don't like some of the things that are going on around us. Some of our societies are not what they ought to be. But with effort, commitment, and good leadership, I think that the African identity, for many of the young people coming up, should be even stronger.

The Fund for Peace is issuing an occasional series of interviews featuring leading voices on issues related to internal war. The Regional Responses to Internal War program is funded by the Carnegie Corporation of New York and is being carried out in partnership with the Stanley Foundation.

FfP: Why is it that countries rich in resources are often the ones that are experiencing internal conflict?

Unfortunately, resources have been a curse for many of our countries. They represent quick money not only to those in power but also to business people on the outside. In collusion with each other, they make no commitment to the country and the people living there. Some of our own rulers and leaders have fallen prey to greed and opened the door to exploitation. Resources can build a country and develop human capacity, infrastructure and institutions. A growing economy can absorb the young school leavers, and give them employment and a source of income. But the resources of a country can also end up in personal bank accounts. Once such a system is set up, it becomes like a magnet, and attracts others. And so, at the extreme, you can find an economy that is criminalized. The people can actually become poorer than they would have been if the country had no resources at all.

FfP: How big a problem is capital flight?

Some thirty-nine percent of African-owned wealth is held outside the continent, according to former Assistant Secretary of State for Africa Chester Crocker.¹ He did not include unrecorded assets like money taken in suitcases on airplanes so the percentage is probably even higher. To compare, Latin America and Asia are somewhere on the order of ten percent.

Capital flight has two basic causes. One source of capital flight is money got illegally. Government officials and business people who have illicit gains obviously don't want to keep them in the country to be discovered so they send it away to private bank accounts in Switzerland or elsewhere. But there is also capital flight due to bad policies. The level of interest rates affects the return on capital. The inability to repatriate profits affects the level of investment. Good businesses that make profits need to return funds to those who have put up the capital. And, if exchange controls or a lack of foreign exchange prevents this, then people work to find ways to keep or send the money outside, sometimes illegally.

Outsiders can help. For example, the Nigerian government has made a plea to countries all over the world for help in repatriating money stolen by the previous government. Even Switzerland is now strengthening its laws so that governments who have a fair claim on illegal capital flight can produce evidence and go to court to recover these sums. But governments should not have to go through legal battles to reclaim public funds. What each country ought to do is create conditions in which capital remains at home and is put to work for economic growth.

FfP: When do you think a government loses legitimacy? Can its activities diminish its claim to sovereignty?

It is a tough question, one that all of our countries and regional institutions are facing today. I believe it is when a government can no longer protect its citizens. It's time to consider some kind of force when a government becomes predatory and begins to move against its own people, repressing them, putting them in jail. We don't know how far we can go in this regard, but a government may also lose sovereignty when it impoverishes its people through bad economic practices, corruption, exploitation and extortion. Governments are supposed to represent and respond to the needs of their people. Standing behind the cloak of sovereignty is no longer acceptable. And this is why the Organization of African Unity (OAU), which has long had the principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of a country, when faced with situations like we faced in Liberia and Sierra Leone, now believes that when those conditions exist, sovereignty no longer holds. The monitoring group of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) intervened in Liberia on that basis. Since then the OAU, now the African Union, has sharpened language that allows for intervention.

We are now going even one step further. The UN's Economic Commission for Africa is trying to develop indicators of good governance. They would compare how each country is faring in preventing violence in society, protecting basic freedoms, establishing a fair judicial system that gives people legal recourse when their rights have been violated and in allowing accountability and transparency of government operations. Monitoring these indicators would be a major contribution to seeing early danger signals of a country headed down a slippery slope. It would provide an opportunity for corrective measures through dialogue, working internally and sometimes supported externally to correct problems. But if that slide continues and all can see it, then I think everybody will understand when a regional group or when an external group says it is time for intervention. There is one other major criteria for intervention. It is time to act when a people reach out beyond their own government to ask for intervention and for help to save their lives, to protect them from their own government.

FfP: Do you have a sense that subregional organizations are growing in legitimacy? What is their potential in the security area?

I share the view that they are growing in importance and in stature. Their contribution has been limited in the past because

there's never been a really strong commitment to regional cooperation or integration. Each country has been more concerned with developing its own national institutions, getting its own priorities right, responding to its own national needs. But we are beginning to see different regional blocs, and we see them able to compete globally. As a result, Africa is becoming much more committed to regional endeavors and institutions that can guide policies and activities across borders.

Bear in mind that one of the reasons our regional institutions have been weak is because our national institutions have been weak. Our national policymaking and decision-making have become too concentrated in our leaders. It is not that the idea of democracy is new to Africa. Consensus has been a normal part of village life. Even where there was a chief or dominant figure, that person did not make major decisions on his or her own. They would gather people around in the palaver hut and get everybody's views and make a decision. As we moved ahead with liberation, its leaders became strong father figures and decision-making became centralized. And of course some countries moved from that phase to military rule. So all of this affected the growth of institutions.

FfP: And now?

We are now beginning to pay attention to building the types of institutions that will limit the personalization of decision-making and policymaking. And so that's bound to also have a major impact on regional institutions. We do have some strong ones. The Arab Maghreb Union is a regional institution with an economic basis for cooperation. They have been establishing some common courts to adjudicate business disputes. ECOWAS itself has been moving closer together. We have a parliament now that brings together parliamentarians from the different member countries. But resources have been a problem. The member countries, with insufficient resources to meet national needs, have not been able to finance the regional institutions properly, to enable them to attract quality staff, and to have the kinds of capacities that would make them more effective. The South African Development Community (SADC) is also a strong organization. Some may have mainly economic objectives, but economic organizations can be the building blocks for stronger institutions of a political nature.

FfP: The negative impact of political instability on economic development is well acknowledged. Can these economic costs be measured?

Paul Collier of the World Bank and others have done some very good work on this.² Obviously, we have the conventional means of measurement. What has conflict done in terms of its impact on GDP? What has it done on the volume of

exports, for example, when producers have had to flee their farms? What impact has conflict had on the flow of goods? Those kinds of measurements can be made and have been made. But you need to go beyond conventional measurements to really see the impact. You need to look at the impact on people's potential, on their education and health. To measure that, we can look at the levels of school enrollment, see if they have fallen from the years prior to conflict. We can look at access to health facilities.

Leaders in the subregion and on the continent must say something is wrong when it is wrong.

But how do you measure the decline in people's aspirations, their aptitude and sense of commitment and confidence? Those are immeasurable. Conflict depresses people's enterprising spirit and creativity. A society is at its best when its members feel a sense of hope in the future, and they understand their own stake and their own role. With conflict, people sit around with a sense of despair, just waiting for an opportunity to escape.

FfP: Is there anything ECOWAS can do about Liberia?

Yes, and now. We're on a slippery slope once again, sliding into chaos. And there's no doubt, chaos in Liberia means chaos in the other Mano River countries. Sierra Leone is attempting to end its armed conflict. Guinea is there in the conflict zone. Refugees spill over into Côte D'Ivoire. ECOWAS needs to have an urgent meeting now, to bring the political leadership from the opposition together with the ruling party to join in a dialogue on how we can stop the suffering of our people. And then, we must create conditions so that people can have an opportunity to participate in the process of change.

FfP: Will the current leadership participate?

They should. Do they have the political will? I don't know. If they don't, they lend credence to the views of the dissidents that no political change is possible except by violent or military means. They have to invest in peace. You can have all the guns, and all the means to suppress a rebellion, but for how long? You must find a way to give people a sense of hope and inclusion. ECOWAS was instrumental in the military intervention and program that

supported the special elections of 1997 that put Mr. Taylor in office. Mr. Taylor has not abided by the rules that brought him to power. One of the main provisions of the Abuja Accord was a restructuring of the army to include people from all the military factions. That was never done. And so he is now facing the remnants from factions that were excluded. That's no justification for what the rebels are doing. The havoc and suffering that results from their actions are not being felt by Mr. Taylor and his associates. It's being felt by ordinary Liberians, civilians who don't deserve this.

fFP: What if Mr. Taylor says no? Has he lost legitimacy or his right to sovereignty?

At this point I think so. Regrettably, Liberia is getting to the place where all the infringements on freedom that bring legitimacy and sovereignty into question are occurring. We're headed in that direction already, and if he doesn't do something to stop it, we will have to appeal to ECOWAS and appeal to the international community to do something to save these people from their own government. I hope he rises to the challenge.

fFP: What is the role of Western countries in partnering with Africa on development issues?

By visiting West Africa, Prime Minister Tony Blair is giving evidence to a commitment, and he's making it a personal thing. And I think that Africans are applauding that. I'm told that at the upcoming G8 meeting, the New Partnership of African Development (NEPAD) is going to be on the agenda. Prime Minister Blair should make a presentation based on his findings on the ground, and hopefully he can encourage some of his colleagues to support this agenda. Britain has already made a major investment in Sierra Leone's recovery and peace. I hope when he leaves, he realizes that peace in Sierra Leone is not sustainable unless we bring peace to Liberia. The two countries are interrelated, with some of the problems in Sierra Leone originating from Liberian involvement. There is no guarantee that half of the guns gone silent in Sierra Leone are not now underground in Liberia.

Leaders in the subregion and on the continent must say something is wrong when it is wrong. We have to admit

wrongdoings by ourselves. We can't cover up or ignore wrong, because if we do, it's bound to come back to haunt us. When we appeal to governments outside the region, to outside institutions, they have a right to ask, "Well, what are your regional leaders saying? Are they speaking out against their colleagues who have violated all your norms? Are they saying this is wrong and we are not going to let you do it?" But the international community which is talking about good governance, and political transition, and all these good things, has to help too.

The Bretton Woods institutions do not want to get involved in politics but you cannot separate politics from economics. They are interrelated. You cannot have an economic program that achieves sustainable growth unless you have the social and political institutions that can create a supporting environment. And so, if you don't get involved in improving the political processes, in a way, you are setting the stage for the failure of economic policies. We don't want to have the World Bank selecting who is the president of our country, or the IMF, because they are not democratic themselves. But, having said that, I think they can do more, to support the building of institutions. Judicial systems, for example, are important for business reasons, and for a good economic environment. Our judicial systems are not independent of the executive, because they're insecure financially. And the international community can support the political process without being involved in partisan politics. It can support a census before elections and proper voter registration. In general, it can support giving people a free and fair choice.

fFP: What can be done for the Liberian people?

Give them a sense of hope. Let them know that today is just today and there is a tomorrow, and that things are being done to secure for them a bright tomorrow.

-- Washington, DC, February 13, 2002

¹ "Mobilizing African Resources for African Development," presented by Chester A. Crocker and Michael P. Taylor at the Attracting Capital to Africa Summit sponsored by the Corporate Council for Africa, Houston, Texas, April 26-28, 1999.

² For more information, see the special issue of *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, volume 46, number 1, February 2002, with an introduction by Paul Collier and Nicholas Sambanis.

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