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Improvements Slowly Coming to Liberia

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By The Associated Press

MONROVIA, Liberia (AP) -- The street lamp that shines on the three young women as they braid each other's hair was not there six months ago. Parts of Liberia's capital now have running water, and a unit of the newly trained 2,500-strong police force has weapons for the first time to fight Monrovia's rampant crime.

One year after Ellen Johnson Sirleaf took an oath as Africa's first elected female head of state, the woman nicknamed "Mother Ellen" by her people can claim credit for small successes.

The Liberia that Sirleaf inherited in January 2006 was still overshadowed by 14 years of civil war and lacked roads, water, electricity and an army. The Harvard-educated former finance minister promised sweeping change -- lighting up Monrovia, bringing back running water, enrolling children in school and stamping out corruption.

Progress has been made, but it's been slow.

"We got the country functioning again, and we changed the image of Liberia from a failed state to a potential post-conflict success," Sirleaf told The Associated Press in an interview at her office in Monrovia late Monday.

One of Sirleaf's biggest accomplishments was her order that all children receive free education through sixth grade, which brought an 80 percent increase in primary school enrollment. Some of the children have not been able to attend school, however, because of shortages of books, materials and classroom space.

Streets have newly painted white and yellow lines and filled-in potholes. About 330 customers have electricity -- mostly hospitals, banks and police stations, said International Resources Group, a contractor in charge of the program. Two Monrovia neighborhoods also have streetlights.

"Before we would have been using candles," said 27-year-old Latifa Fofana, whose hair was being braided under a streetlight in one of those neighborhoods. "I'd congratulate (Sirleaf) for doing well."

Still, Liberia is very much in the "potential" stage. Unemployment hovers around 80 percent and many returning refugees just add to the number of people without jobs.

Rape, which was used as a weapon during the war, continues to be widespread. A newly passed law imposes a sentence of life imprisonment for rape, but a male-dominated judiciary has hampered enforcement, Sirleaf said.

"Big, big problem," she said, sighing, of the prevalence of rape. "Part of it has to do with a breakdown in family values. The families have disintegrated. Women are heads of households. They have to go out of the home sometimes to do marketing or to do jobs ... So many of the children don't have the right supervision. The school has not been there to absorb all of these people."

National security is still dependent on a 15,000-member U.N. peacekeeping mission that helped bring an end to the war in 2003. A new 2,000-strong army is being trained, but many of the former 100,000 combatants are still without jobs, long after a disarmament program has ended.

The war still colors much of daily life -- from burned-out buildings occupied by squatters to U.N. roadblocks -- but Sirleaf has stayed away from the debate over how to mete out justice to those responsible for wartime atrocities. About 200,000 people were killed in the fighting and more than 1.5 million were displaced.

Sirleaf said the man many blame for starting the bloodshed -- former warlord-turned-president Charles Taylor -- does not need to be prosecuted at home because he is already being tried by a U.N.-backed court for atrocities committed in neighboring Sierra Leone. The trial is scheduled for later this year in the Netherlands. He has pleaded not guilty.

"He doesn't need to be tried here," Sirleaf said. "Let him go through the due process that has already charged him on so many counts."

Liberia has set up a Truth and Reconciliation Commission to compile testimony by both victims and perpetrators in the war, and that group may eventually make recommendations to the government to put certain serious offenders on trial.

Sirleaf has cracked down on corruption, ordering investigations of government officials accused of stealing from state coffers and publicly disclosing the cost of trips she's taken.

She has cautioned against taking legal action against former child soldiers, saying many were drugged or threatened into compliance.

"There are thousands and thousands of youth that committed atrocities, sometimes not under their own control," Sirleaf said. "If we put them into a war crimes tribunal, what would become of our young people?"



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