

# The Washington Post

## Joy as Liberia switches on lights after 15 years

By Alphonso Toweh

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MONROVIA (Reuters) - Power was restored to parts of Liberia's dilapidated capital Monrovia for the first time in 15 years on Wednesday, another step in the country's fragile emergence from more than a decade of civil war.

Looting during the 14-year conflict, which ended in 2003, shattered the West African country's infrastructure. Power cables were torn down and water pipes ripped up for scrap metal by fighters, many of them child soldiers high on drugs.

"The switching on today is symbolic. It symbolizes our journey from darkness to illumination," President Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf said, flicking a switch draped in a Liberian flag to turn on the lights around a suburban clinic.

Residents of the Sinkhor and Congo Town neighborhoods cheered outside the JKF Hospital as the power came on. Children who had never seen street lights illuminated watched in wonder.

"My last daughter does not even know what a street light is. When she saw it she did not want to leave," said Boima Dennis, 45, his four-year old daughter by his side.

Johnson-Sirleaf, Africa's first elected female head of state, promised when she took office in January that she would work to restore power to the seaside capital within 150 days.

It seemed a bold promise for the city, a hotchpotch of moss-covered ruins and shantytowns whose wealthier districts hum to the sound of fuel-powered private generators while its poorer quarters are plunged into darkness each night.

Foreign donors struggled to help even after the war ended: technical assistance failed when equipment was looted and aid funds went astray at the hands of the corrupt transitional government that preceded Johnson-Sirleaf's election.

"When I made this commitment I was on the outside looking in. But when I got in ... it became difficult and I started to think 'How do I keep this?'" she acknowledged.

### LADY POWER

Liberia's war was one of the most brutal in modern African history, killing a quarter of a million people and ending when warlord and President Charles Taylor -- now in The Hague on war crimes charges -- fled to exile in Nigeria.

The "Emergency Power Program" in Monrovia, which is also only just beginning to restore piped water, will initially power hospitals, schools, police stations, and community facilities as well as street lights on main routes.

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"This is what Mr. Charles Taylor could have done in four years, but failed to do so. Look, the lady has done something in six months," said William Tengbeh, 31, a car mechanic.

Johnson-Sirleaf thanked the European Union and United States, two major donors, as well as President John Kufuor of Ghana, who jointly switched on the power after his country supplied some of the streetlights and generators.

"We are now assisting the LEC (Liberia Electricity Corporation) in collecting revenues to make the business self-funding," said Lou Mazel, charge d'affaires at the U.S. embassy in Monrovia.

"Electrification of more parts of Monrovia and Liberia will be possible only if LEC earns its way as a viable entity."



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