

Remarks Prior to a Meeting With President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf of Liberia
February 27, 2015

President Obama. It's a great pleasure to welcome once again the President of Liberia, President Sirleaf. She has been a great friend and ally of the United States. And Liberia and the United States obviously have an extraordinary bond and extraordinary history.

President Sirleaf came into office under some of the most challenging of circumstances. After a brutal civil war, she has worked steadily to solidify democracy, to reduce corruption, to deliver basic services to a very poor country. And she's done so with grace and steadiness and reached out to all the people of Liberia.

Last year proved to be an extraordinarily difficult challenge. Because of the Ebola crisis, we saw the kind of death and disruption of an entire country and entire region of the sort that we haven't seen very often in modern history. I want to express my deepest condolences to the thousands who died from this deadly disease. Their families obviously continue to grieve.

But what is extraordinary is, because of President Sirleaf's leadership, because of the heroism of so many people in Liberia, and because of the actions of the United States and ultimately the international community, we have made extraordinary strides in driving back Ebola. Cases are now down 95 percent from their peak. We just have a handful of cases that come up per week.

Our job is not yet done, and neighboring countries like Guinea and Sierra Leone are still somewhat behind the progress that's been made in Liberia. But because of the extraordinary courage of health workers and community leaders and President Sirleaf and her administration, what could have been an even more devastating crisis has been brought under control.

And I am very proud of the participation of the United States. Our men and women in uniform who helped to set up the logistical capacity to absorb additional aid and health workers from around the world, our ability to set up labs and provide technical assistance that allowed Liberian health workers and other international partners to go in and do the contact tracing and to establish the safe burial practices and raise community awareness and to provide more humane treatment—all those things have contributed to confidence that we're going to be able to stamp out this disease completely.

And in the meantime, normal life is beginning to return to Liberia. Children are beginning to go back to school. People are beginning to go back to soccer matches. Businesses have reopened. And the flow and rhythm of normal life has begun to return.

So we are very proud of what Liberia has accomplished, and we've been very proud to be partners with Liberia in that process.

The meeting today will obviously discuss how we make sure that we're not complacent so long as there's even one case of Ebola remaining in West Africa. But we're now also in a position to look towards the future. This has had a devastating economic impact, not surprisingly, on Liberia. And so we're going to have to work with President Sirleaf to find ways to strengthen the economy: to rebuild infrastructure, to make sure that some of the development goals that had been set previously are accelerated, to deal with some of the

economic contraction. It requires us to—and others in the international community to—work with our West Africa partners to ensure that growth returns to Liberia.

Those are all areas where we're very interested to hear how we can be helpful. We've got some ideas as well. In the meantime, on programs—everything from our Millennial Challenge grants to encouraging international investment, to the return of Peace Corps volunteers—we want to accelerate as much as possible a return to Liberian growth and development, to accelerate some of the efforts that President Sirleaf had already begun to reduce corruption, and to make sure that prosperity and growth is broad based, not just in Monrovia, but throughout rural areas. That's the kind of partnership that we're looking forward to, and we could not have a better partner than President Sirleaf.

So we thank you so much for your leadership. We're very proud of the work that we've done with you. We know that the job is not yet done, but it shows what can be accomplished when you've got strong, democratic leaders on the ground and international partners who are ready to join in dealing with some of the toughest challenges that any country has ever faced.

President Johnson Sirleaf. Mr. President, I thank you for your kind words. We've come to express, on behalf of the Liberian people, to you, to the Congress, to all the entities, what we call the frontline responders, to faith-based institutions, to the American people in general, for the support we received as we fought this virus.

We want to really recognize the extraordinary leadership that you provided. We recall when the U.N. Secretary General, Ban Ki-moon, called for a global meeting to discuss this disease, one which we said was the most threatening to global peace, you were there. And you gave the clarion call to the global community to see the threat this disease represented. And as a result of that, the support that came from U.S. entities was then supplemented by so many others around the world.

We know that there was fear in this country, and we understood that because we were fearful ourselves. We didn't know how to confront this unknown enemy. And we know that there was some pressure here to be able to stop any traveling of people from Liberia or from the other affected countries. But we want to thank you for standing firm in resisting that pressure and rallying the American people to see this for what it was and to join partnership with Liberia and others to be able to confront it.

We also thank you for the military. We know that this may not have been welcomed by many, or by some. But that made a critical difference in sending a strong message to the Liberian people that the United States was with us. And the military not only braced the confidence and the motivation of the Liberian people to save themselves, but also left behind a very permanent contribution, because they worked with our military, and as a result of that, today our military can go out and they can build those structures, health treatment centers, because of their association and their work with the U.S. military.

As you correctly pointed out, even though 13 of our 15 political subdivisions have now zero—no new cases, and even though we feel confident that we're getting to the place where we can really say we can confront and we can beat this disease, but we know we're not there yet. We're not there because we are still in the region where there are a few other affected countries, two others. They have not reached the level of success and progress that we have. But we know that we all remain under threat until all of us have reached a place where we get to zero. And so we have to remain resilient.

We'd like to see a regional approach for the protection of our borders, to be able to monitor and to manage cross-border travel in our long and porous borders. We'd like to see the partnership continue as we move toward rebuilding our health infrastructure.

We today have had some meetings, and today we remain confident. And you know, Mr. President, the one critical element in all of this was our people, particularly our community people. They took charge. They said, we're not going to die. We're not going to lose our livelihoods. We're not going to reverse the gains that we have made over the past 10 years, 10 consecutive years of peace. And so we're going to—so they got the support from you, they got the support from the U.S. entities, and they got the support from the international community. But they took responsibility, they took leadership, they took ownership.

And going forward, we want to strengthen that. We do not want to lose that motivation and capacity. We want to see them now apply it, post-Ebola, to be able to accelerate our own development agenda.

So again, Mr. President, our message—my team that's here with me and the Liberian people—is to come and say to the American people, to the U.S. Congress who supported your program—in a bipartisan way, I might say—to say to you that your support, your partnership has worked. We see it as a success story, even though we've got a lot of more work to do. But the basic word is, we're here to thank you.

President Obama. Thank you, Madam President. Appreciate it. Thank you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 11:37 a.m. in the Oval Office at the White House.

Categories: Meetings With Foreign Leaders and International Officials : Liberia, President Johnson Sirleaf.

Locations: Washington, DC.

Names: Johnson Sirleaf, Ellen.

Subjects: Africa : West Africa, Ebola epidemic, response and containment efforts; Liberia : Economic growth and development; Liberia : President; Liberia : Relations with U.S.; Liberia : U.S. assistance.

DCPD Number: DCPD201500130.