

# **Ebola-hit Liberia no longer America's forgotten stepchild**

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As Liberia's president visits the US Senate on Thursday to thank Americans for their pivotal role in the Ebola recovery, she will reflect on a sometimes fractious relationship spanning two centuries.

Ellen Johnson Sirleaf is due to address senators before meeting US President Barack Obama Friday to discuss the recovery from an outbreak which has claimed 9,500 lives.

Of the West African nations afflicted by the disease, Liberia—where more 4,000 people have died—is seen as the most advanced in curbing the spread of Ebola, largely thanks to unprecedented US support.

Around \$2.5 billion has been allocated by the White House to help Liberia fight and recover from Ebola, while Obama has played a supportive role in securing IMF and World Bank cash.

Some 2,800 US troops—the largest-ever US deployment to the region—are being brought home after building clinics, training nurses and working around the clock to beat back the epidemic.

Analysts initially voiced concerns over how Liberians, savaged by 14 years of ruinous civil war, would react to a new foreign armed presence and questioned US motives for its sudden philanthropy.

US engagement in Liberia began in the 1820s when the Congress- and slaveholder-funded American Colonization Society began sending freed

slaves to its shores.

Thousands of "Americo-Liberian" settlers followed, declaring themselves independent in 1847 and setting up a government to rule over a native African majority that it gave no right to vote.

## **'Racist motives'**

James Ciment, the author of "Another America: The Story of Liberia and the Former Slaves Who Ruled It", describes Liberia as "America's half-forgotten stepchild", poorly set up and neglected thereafter by the US.

America's engagement with Ebola was nothing more than the fulfilment of a "special obligation" to help Liberia, he argued in Slate magazine in September.

Peter Pham, author of "Liberia: Portrait of a Failed State", and director of the Washington-based Atlantic Council's Ansari Africa Center, offers a similar analysis.

"To be quite frank, some of the benefactors who financed the repatriation of former slaves and other African diaspora to what became Liberia had unabashed racist motives," he told AFP.

Pham points to the US refusal to recognise Liberian independence until nearly 20 years after Europe as evidence that the prevailing view of a "special relationship" is little more than a "comforting myth".

Liberia has nonetheless been an unswerving ally, allowing itself to be used as a US military base during World War II and backing Washington at the UN on Cold War issues, particularly the Vietnam war.

In return, the US has provided a fortune in aid—more than \$600 million since 2009, according to the State Department—but critics say the American balance sheet remains in deficit.

They point to US support of the corrupt, repressive military dictator Samuel Doe in the 1980s, and its failure to remove him and broker peace ahead of civil conflict which left 250,000 Liberians dead.

### **'Moral responsibility'**

Pham, however, believes this black-and-white picture fails to recognise Liberia's own responsibility for its historical woes.

"While Doe was a brute and nowadays is universally condemned, it should be remembered that at the time he seized power, he was enormously popular with a vast majority of Liberians," he said.

In Liberia itself, academia tends to have a nuanced view of American influence on its "stepchild", seeing both good and bad.

Edward Wonkeryor, a vice-president of Liberia's Cuttington University, acknowledges US economic influence in west Africa as a motivation for helping Liberia.

The continent has been home to six of the world's 10 fastest-growing economies in the past decade, according to a 2010 study by the McKinsey Global Institute.

Yet just one percent of US investment abroad goes to Africa and many analysts believe China has surpassed America as its largest partner.

As far as its moral obligations go, Wonkeryor believes the Ebola crisis has presented Washington with a test that it has begun to pass.

"The US is helping with the Ebola crisis because it has a moral responsibility towards Liberia, considering the historical, cultural, economic, social, and ideological and security relationships between both countries, from the founding of Liberia up to the present," he said.

Major General Darryl Williams, the head of the US army in Africa, led a task force in Monrovia to set up the American Ebola mission in September last year, with the epidemic at its peak.

He told reporters at a recent military conference in Dakar the intention from the beginning had been to force back the epidemic and hand its management back to civilians as quickly as possible.

"We went into the process trying to work ourselves out of a job," he said.

Asked by AFP if he felt his troops had won over ordinary Liberians amid initial suspicion, he said the welcome from locals had been "absolutely overwhelming—very warm".

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