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President of Liberia speaks at Furman

BY RUDOLPH BELL • STAFF WRITER • APRIL 14, 2009

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The president of Liberia told an audience at Furman University on Monday that she feels a big responsibility as the first woman elected to lead an African nation.

ADVERTISEMENT "Everything I do will be looked at," said Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, president of Liberia since January of 2006. "Every word I say will be examined in its meaning."

Sirleaf touched on the role of gender in Liberian politics and other topics during a 45-minute talk on the stage of McAlister Auditorium as part of the Riley Institute's continuing series on women in politics. Immediately afterward, she spoke at a fundraiser for Water of Life, a Christian ministry that provides clean drinking water in Liberia.

Sirleaf said women played a big role in her election in 2005, deciding, "Our time has come. Men have ruled our country for 150 years, and this time we are going to take charge."

Sirleaf, who had been imprisoned for challenging earlier regimes, defeated soccer star George Weah with 60 percent of the vote.

She has a master's degree from Harvard University and formerly worked as a bank executive and World Bank economist. She received the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 2007. Her mother was born in Greenville, Liberia.

Sirleaf also talked about efforts to rebuild the economy and reform the laws of Liberia following the corrupt and violent regimes of Samuel Doe and Charles Taylor and a 14-year civil war.

Liberia was founded in 1820 by freed slaves from the United States.

"We've come a long way, but we still have a long way to go," Sirleaf said.

She also praised Water of Life, which has built or rehabilitated about 400 wells in Liberia, said Roland Bergeron, executive director of the Greenville-based ministry. Bergeron said Water of Life developed a good relationship with Sirleaf as a result of its charitable work in Liberia.

"She likes our work and likes our organization," he said. "About eight months ago, she said when she came to the United States she'd like to come to Greenville to help us raise money for her country."

Sirleaf was presented with an honorary Doctor of Humanities degree by Furman President David Shi, Furman chairwoman Kathleen McKinney and Furman board member Dick Riley, a former governor of South Carolina and U.S. education secretary and the namesake of Furman's Riley Institute.

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Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, president of the Republic of Liberia, and Furman president Dr. David Shi talk at Furman University on Monday. (GEORGE GARDNER/Staff)

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