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## Liberian president talks about U.S. partnership

Wednesday, 15 April 2009

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GREENVILLE -- Liberian President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf reminded an audience at Furman University on Monday of the strong partnership the United States maintains with the rebuilding African country.

That partnership extends to the private sector, as U.S. businesses assist in Liberia's redevelopment effort.

Global Building Solutions of Charleston, for example, has set up a sister company in Liberia, said co-owner Ben Gramling, who attended the event. The company recently completed construction of the RLJ Kendeja Resort & Villages there.

"Liberia is starting the process of construction and renewal," Sirleaf said, noting the country lacks meaningful infrastructure and needs sewer lines, schools, hospitals and roads.

The country, which was founded by freed slaves from the United States, recently turned on street lights in one town for the first time.

"Just with that you'd see children dancing in the streets because they've never seen that before. Other countries take that for granted," said Sirleaf, who was at Furman as part of The Riley Institute's continuing series on women in politics.

Now, Liberia must use its rich mineral, agricultural and timber resources to boost its economy, she said.

"We must put the private sector at the center of that effort," Sirleaf said.

Known as Africa's "Iron Lady," Sirleaf is the first woman to lead an African country, elected president in 2005 after years of authoritarian rule and civil war in Liberia.

"Throughout it all, the U.S. has been a major partner," she said.

An economist trained at Harvard University, Sirleaf has been an executive at World Bank, Citicorp and HSB Equator and directed the United Nations Development Project for Africa.

"I waited on tables and cleaned floors like everyone else to get an education," Sirleaf recalled her time in the United States.

She noted that being the first female president there brings great responsibility as her every remarked is scrutinized.

In a country that continues to improve living conditions for women, some of whom were captured as sex slaves during the 14-year civil war, women played a large role in Sirleaf's election, she noted.

Sirleaf beat popular soccer star George Weah with 60% of the vote.

"Women decided our time had come," Sirleaf said. "Men have ruled this country for 150 years, and this time we are going to take charge."

Now, Sirleaf is charged with rebuilding the economy, erasing a \$4 billion debt, fighting corruption, strengthening the judicial system and uniting a country of 16 tribes.

"Our challenge today is to make sure everyone is a Liberian first," Sirleaf said.

At the event, Sirleaf was presented with an honorary Doctor of Humanities Degree by Furman President David Shi, Furman chairwoman Kathleen McKinney and former S.C. Gov. and U.S. Education Secretary Dick Riley, a Furman board member, alumnus and namesake of The Riley Institute.

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