



Belgian
Senate

Visit of HE Mrs Ellen Johnson Sirleaf

President of the Republic of Liberia

Nobel Peace Prize laureate

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Proceedings



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Mrs Sabine de Bethune, Chairwoman of the Senate. – Mrs President, it is an honour and indeed a pleasure to welcome you back in our midst today. The Belgian Senate already had the privilege of receiving you here in the spring of 2006. I am very glad of this new opportunity to strengthen the friendly relations between our countries.

Allow me, Mrs President, to briefly outline your career, which can be called outstanding in so many respects. I would just like to point out a few of its highlights. You started out as a US-trained economist and served as Finance minister in the government of Liberia. You became the first woman President in Africa in January 2006 and were again called to the Highest Office of your country in 2011. That same year, you received the Nobel Peace Prize, together with Mrs Tawakkul Karman and Ms Leymah Gbowee. This award was an international endorsement of your fight for women's and children's rights, an ideal sustained by a lifelong unrelenting determination.

In a nutshell, I would call you an economist by training and a women's rights activist by vocation, a combination that proved invaluable to your understanding of women's and children's problems. Economic and social welfare on the one hand and domestic and individual wellbeing on the other hand are indeed two sides of the same coin.

The international community soon realized that your expertise reached well beyond these issues and encompassed the global problems of development cooperation in general. Thus, last May, you were selected as one of the Co-Chairs of a UN High-Level Panel on the MDGs' Post 2015 Development Agenda, along with the Indonesian President and the British Prime Minister. I wholeheartedly agree with you when you state that we are in need of *“a framework that builds upon, but goes beyond, the MDGs in the establishment of goals that are ambitious, but achievable.”*

Since this debate has increasingly been at the forefront of the European and International Development Agendas, our Assembly decided the time had come to make its voice heard as well. This spring, the Committee for External Relations and Defence set up a working group to reflect on the Post 2015 MDG framework.

The working group will, based on hearings with various experts, make a series of recommendations to the government. It decided to start off with a meeting with the Belgian minister for Development Cooperation, who called for the creation of an international MDG Forum, uniting all relevant actors with a key role for civil society.

Obviously, the working group will have to look into a number of fundamental questions. Shall we continue on the well-trodden paths of existing MDGs, updating them whenever necessary, or shall we try an innovative approach, introducing an entirely new structure? Should we ‘act small and think big’ by creating custom-made MDGs adapted to local needs, without jeopardizing their universal character? Should we

commit ourselves to a number of new additional development themes such as climate change, overpopulation and urbanization, human rights, economic growth and good governance, in order to capture the complexity of human development?

To come up with satisfactory answers to these pressing issues, we will have to use our political imagination to unite all levels of decision-making: national, European and international. We must enlarge our commitment to using and reinventing MDGs. Thus, we can create a win-win situation for the developing countries, as well as for the West. With you as one of its leaders, the High-Level UN-Panel Post 2015 will have to address, in the immediate future, these huge challenges. With the benefit of your first-hand knowledge of suffering through poverty and violence, I believe it stands more than a fair chance of succeeding. I trust, with your help, the MDGs will enter the post 2015 era with renewed vigour and strength.

I think there is every reason to hope for a good outcome on this score. I would like to end with a quote from Albert Einstein: *In the middle of difficulty lies opportunity.*

Mrs Ellen Johnson Sirleaf. – Mrs President and honourable members of the Senate, special guests, citizens of Belgium, Liberian delegation, dear friends;

Let me start by recalling the long years of relationship between Belgium and Liberia, which goes back to 1859 when Belgium recognized our country's independence. This was reinforced in 1885 through the signing of a treaty granting Liberia privileged nation status in trade and commerce. Of course, due to our many years of conflict, many of our relationships were

interrupted and this favoured nation privilege was lost. Today that relationship is being rebuilt through the European Commission and through other multilateral institutions, which you support. Liberia's recovery is underway and we would like to express our appreciation to you on behalf of the Liberian people.

As you know, when Liberia found peace through the Accra Comprehensive Peace Agreement in 2003, we then moved into a transition government and to democratic elections in 2005, in which I was lucky to have been chosen by the Liberian people to lead the nation. We inherited a collapsed economy, dysfunctional institutions, displaced people, low income, loss of our best brains, destroyed infrastructure, all of which we have been trying to rebuild since that time. We have re-established our institutions and put in place new laws and new strategies. We have adopted a development agenda under four pillars: Peace and Security, Economic Reconstruction, Governance and the Rule of Law, and Infrastructure and Basic Services. I am pleased to inform you that with the support we have received from many of our partners from around the world, we have been able to maintain nine years of consecutive peace. We have built a brand new, well-trained professional army with the support of our key partner, the United States. We have been able to train our other security forces and have a peace keeping force whose numbers have now decreased to 7000. There is an exit strategy in which we hope that, within two to three years, Liberia's security will be safely in our own hands and we will be able to maintain the peace.

As to the economic reconstruction, we have succeeded in putting our economy together. Liberia is not a poor country in terms of natural resources, and the economy has grown by an average of 6.5% over the last six years. This is expected to increase when we put into operation the \$16bn direct foreign investment that has been mobilized over the last five years. Investment is being made in our mining sector, where Liberia is rich in iron ore, gold, and diamonds. Other investments are in our forestry sector, which is now operating at a 43% of the biodiversity of West Africa. In the agricultural sector, investors from Asia, Malaysia and Indonesia have been brought in to invest in palm oil, since Liberia has such a comparative advantage. In addition, in our marine sector, fisheries are now starting up. Finally, in the petroleum sector, we have great hopes that we will find oil.

In the area of Good Governance, we have built our institutions and have promoted an open society where all freedoms and rights are respected. There are functional judicial systems, which, although with their problems, are still undergoing improvement. We are building our capacity where civil servants have seen their compensation increased to be able to reduce their vulnerabilities. New laws have been introduced to protect our citizens. Constitutional and statutory rights have been enforced. We are, however, working on all matters relating to corruption, something that has been inherited from a society where values were turned upside down during long periods of deprivation. But we do have the institutions and we have increased compensation to reduce vulnerabilities, we have established systems, tried to build capacity and are now strengthening the judiciary for punishment.

In the area of Infrastructure and Basic Services, we have been able to restore those things that citizens have not had for a long time, such as electric power and water. We are reconstructing the health and school systems, putting in telecommunication systems, and are now working with our neighbouring countries to expand those services in a regional way, through a promotion of regional integration and cooperation.

There are big challenges ahead of us, as our nation is young. Sixty per cent of the population is 35 years old or younger, many of whom used to be child soldiers and do not have the education nor skills to enable them to take care of themselves. Therefore, we have to focus on what we can do to equip them and to make them productive citizens. However, we are confident as we move towards the launching of our new long-term perspective development Agenda, which will take us to the year 2030. This Agenda will build upon the four pillars in which we have made progress and in which we still have challenges. We can recognize the additional efforts that will be required on our behalf to properly manage our natural resources to bring equal opportunity to all of our people. So we can say, with a certain amount of confidence, with the continued support we have had, that in ten years' time Liberia should not require official external development assistance. We should be able to take care of ourselves on the basis of our own resources. We hope that, by the year 2030, Liberia will be a middle-income country when the development agenda ends.

Now, I would like to go to the era that you asked me to talk about. In September, the United Nations Secretary General appointed me one of the three Co-Chairs of a High-Level

Panel, which consists of some 24 members, representing all the regions of the world, with four from Africa. This Panel is to lead the effort that would formulate the new Global Agenda when the MDGs come to an end in 2015. Our approach is one that is largely consultative, as 24 people cannot determine the Global Agenda that would affect everyone throughout the world. It is a guiding process, bringing together people with rich experiences, who have already worked in the formulations of Global Agendas in the past. These people will be a part of the consultative process now taking place all over the world in different regions, with the involvement of civil society and others, so that, whatever Agenda comes out, reflects what the collective people of the world have said it should.

However, we do not believe that we should discard the MDGs in which there are strong indicators where progress has been made. So we want to see where we are, and encourage all countries to look at their progress, to identify what additional efforts are needed to be able to achieve as many of those goals as possible in the last three remaining years and, consequently, to build on that record in formulating the New Agenda. We recognize that some of those that relate to women's empowerment and to health and education will have to be maintained. Nevertheless, how we put them into the new framework will come out of these consultations.

We are guided by three basic strands in trying to meet the Secretary General's own mandate of coming up with an Agenda that is realistic, achievable, but which is bold. Firstly, economic growth, which we consider of fundamental importance for a nation to achieve its objectives and its goals.

Whenever an economy is neither functioning nor working, we go beyond the normal consultation to bring in the private sector, so that the private sector also has a say in how this growth can be achieved in the public-private partnerships. The second strand is social equity, which recognizes that the gap between the rich and the poor has continued to widen in too many countries. Too many people have been bypassed, whether it is in education, medical care or income. The question now is to make sure that whatever we do reflects this equity, this equal opportunity, where everyone has a chance not only to contribute to a growing economy, but to benefit from it, as well. We must also recognize new global dynamics, such as environmental sustainability, as the third strand. As was discussed in Rio, the work coming out of climate change, sustainable development objectives in natural resource capital protection have to be built into that framework to ensure recognition of these new dynamics.

There are other areas, for example, such as the Group Seven Plus, of which Liberia is a part. These are the fragile states, which would like to see an Agenda that takes into account their particular circumstances, which stem from the devastation of war. These countries want to take their destiny into their own hands, to have the ownership factor, and be duly recognized.

All of these are the basic elements of a framework. As I said before, it will not be the High-Level Panel that is going to dictate the New Global Agenda, but it will be from people like you, in this room, from the citizens present here, who represent civil society. It will come from the institutions, the academic institutions that have done research and analyses into these

areas and which have produced those reports assessing the progress and challenges of the MDGs to be able to guide and provide the road map on how to bind all these threads together into a framework. Clearly when this framework is done, when the end work puts forward those basic thoughts, those basic indicators, each country will have to take and use the framework in the specificity that comes from its own country. Each country contributes its own endowment, its own resources, its own priorities to the general framework.

I do not have the answers. I am only part of the group that is trying to get the answers, to get the suggestions and the interventions to present a draft report to the Secretary General in June of 2013. This report will then be taken to the General Assembly in September. In the meantime, in my own continent, our own institutions are at work. The African Union, the Economic Commission for Africa, and some of our civil society organizations are meeting to give the input as to what we see as being the African position. I also know that similar type consultations and processes are underway in Europe, Latin America, North America, Asia, and other places. We have had two meetings of the High-Level Panel, one in New York in September, and one at the end of October in London. The next meeting is foreseen in Monrovia, with a final meeting in Jakarta in March.

Global processes are no more than what they are, suggestions, framework, guidance to individual nations to use as they see fit in an integrative way, recognizing that today we are an interdependent world. There is not one nation, nor region, that can subsist entirely on its own. We are all a part of each other's

supply chain, whether one is a frontier region like Africa, or an emerging group like the BRIC's (Brazil, India, and China) or a developed country like yourselves. That interdependence, that financial, economic and environmental integration is something we must all work for together, to make this world a safer and better place.

Mrs Sabine de Bethune. – I will now ask some colleagues to take the floor to ask some questions.

Mr Herman De Croo, member of the House of Representatives. – Your experience is amazing and we are full of admiration for what you are going to perform. But when you look at Africa, and as you know Belgium is quite interested in Central Africa, especially in the DRC, we see there almost all the definitions of the difficulties you are fighting against. Therefore, we would like to ask you if there could be a kind of contribution by countries such as yours as an example to try to save the DRC, and to make it once again a strong, free, human rights loving country, and to get rid of its status as a fragile, even dangerous state. Can your country help the DRC to restore its rights, its constitution, its activities, and at least its peace, since it remains an example of an extremely fragile state?

Mrs Ellen Johnson Sirleaf. – The Democratic Republic of Congo has great potential, as it is perhaps one of the richest natural resource countries in Africa. We hope that the work ongoing in the African Union, in which I have a part, will be able to assist the DRC to channel those resources along the lines we now see unfolding in many of our countries. The African Union may have problems dealing with Rwanda, Uganda or Mozambique, which are all resource-rich countries that have now

passed the threshold and are moving towards democratic rule and economic self-sufficiency. Due to its breadth, its diversity and its resourcefulness, the DRC has many more challenges than, say, the smaller nations that represent the fragile states. Nevertheless, I believe that by working with the African Union and by working with you, Belgium, which has had long historical ties with the DRC, it, too, can get on the pathway to reducing its fragility through proper management of its natural resources.

Mrs Olga Zrihen, senator. – Mrs President, it is really astonishing the way you have given us the feeling that things can change, and may I add that, as a woman, you have the experience to make it change. So, I would like to ask you in which way, in Liberia, can women take part in all the positive aspects of the evolution of your society? What are the trends you can have as far as the Millennium goals are concerned?

Mrs Ellen Johnson Sirleaf. – I believe that women today are taking charge. If you look around, you can see that women leadership is improving throughout society and in all areas, both in your country and in mine, and in many others. However, we do need to put the emphasis on women in the informal sector, those poor women in Africa, the women farmers, the women traders, those without education, who remain illiterate. How do we empower them, to allow them to take their rightful place in society? We continue to work with them on education, as I mentioned earlier, starting with girl children. We try to ensure that women have equal rights, constitutions and laws. There has been a lot of progress in women's empowerment in the MDGs, and Liberia itself has been able to meet that

particular requirement. Working with the women's groups and women leaders all over the world to enhance this empowerment is indeed the way to go.

Mrs Sabine de Bethune. – Thank you, Mrs President. Do other colleagues want to ask questions? We have a class of students in our midst; perhaps one of them would like to raise a question.

Ms Lien Cuppens. – I would like to thank you very much for your speech. On behalf of the students of KU Leuven, I would like to ask two questions. Firstly, to what extent are the MDGs incorporated in the policies of the African Union and, secondly, to what extent is the gender component integrated into the decision making process of the AU?

Mrs Ellen Johnson Sirleaf. – The MDGs are part of the development agenda of all of our countries. Not a lot of attention was paid to the MDGs when they were launched in the year 2000, they were just considered another UN paper, another UN document. It was not until countries began to be competitive, when the African Union itself, the Economic Commission of Africa, began to make comparative reports on where countries stood on particular indicators, that a lot of attention was drawn to the MDGs. So the formulated development agenda post 2000 began to ensure that countries took this into account by integrating it. But, unfortunately, it is still not fully integrated in all individual national agendas. The results differ from place to place and also depend greatly on the national capacity. Many countries do not have data reliability for them to judge if they are really making progress, as they are just setting up the statistical systems. Full integration has not

been possible, but the attention and reports bring them more and more into focus, and this should become more evident when we move to the next stage, after 2015.

Ms Leen Scheerlinck. – I am delighted to finally meet you. We invited you some years ago to a conference on women, war and peace and particularly to speak on Resolution 1325. As I missed the beginning of your speech, I probably missed out on your explanation of the importance and impact of 1325 within the framework of sustainable development goals and sustainable growth and economic development. I think that your country is one of the leading countries where women have got the place they deserve. Although the ideal is not yet reached, the basic principles have been respected. Therefore, I would like to ask you if you have any ideas or experiences that you could share with us on the empowerment of women within the development of peace, economic development and cooperation. One of the major challenges for the new goals will be how we can achieve a balance of economics, social equality, empowerment of women and the ecological dimension. Do you have any suggestions? How can women's organizations participate in the process? What we see on the floor is that they are often excluded from information, and excluded from consultation. Women are often not heard. I would like to hear from you, as there are many things we can learn.

Mrs Ellen Johnson Sirleaf. – Regarding Resolution 1325, the achievements of the goals there very much depend on what the countries themselves have done to develop those national programmes. Liberia is a country in which we have strong women's organizations and, consequently, our national agenda

was formulated very early. We have tried to twin with Ireland on that, and use the experiences of the two countries. Liberia's women empowerment indicator has been largely successful. Today, whilst there are still inequities and inequalities between women and men – whether you are dealing with the compensation or access to factors of production, particularly for women in the informal sector –, a lot of progress has been made. Presently, we lack women leadership on levels of society, we need more women presidents throughout the world, as they can bring not only that quality in competence, qualification and commitment, but they can bring that extra sensitivity to what is required in the human perspective. You here have a Senate President, can you do more?

Mr Bogdan Vanden Berghe. – I would like to thank you for the overview of the efforts that have been made by your country. However, since the object of the discussion was the post 2015 Agenda, I have two questions for you. Many efforts have been made by all kinds of actors to reach the MDGs, but despite these efforts, I think that many targets will be missed by 2015 and yet we are already talking about the new Agenda. So, which efforts do you consider necessary to reach as many targets as possible by 2015, and especially what can northern and western governments contribute to the effort? Secondly, in the MDGs, seven targets were to be reached by southern countries and only the 8th MDG has to be reached by western governments, so in any new framework that comes, how do you think that this can be better balanced (efforts by southern countries and efforts by western countries), in view of these dire economic times?

Mrs Ellen Johnson Sirleaf. – On the first question, you are right in saying that many countries are going to miss reaching the goals, but there are still three years to go, and several countries have indeed made a lot of progress. Each country will have to determine which of the goals they are likely to achieve with some extra effort in policies, in programmes and in their implementation. Certainly, many of our African countries are not going to meet the majority of these goals and so this is why a successor scheme cannot just dismiss the important indicators of the MDGs. We must take them, reshape them and refine them towards carrying the same objective, whether in dealing with enrolment or in the quality of education. You have to build on these to get a stronger indicator. Regarding the second question, you are absolutely right. In the MDGs there is the responsibility of the developed countries to offer partnership and funding to be able to achieve these goals, but this has not been reached at all. So the question is: how do we, in the new Agenda, ensure and reach a better balance? For example, poor countries would have to achieve a 50% reduction in poverty and be able to reduce their maternal and child mortality rates in order to empower women, and go even beyond that to take ownership. This ownership would mean a better use of our own resources and a complete change in the relationship from our being exporters of primary products and importers of finished products, to the place where we, too, can have added value to create the factories and jobs, to be able to create the income to finance our own goals. These are the issues that will come up in the dialogue.

Ms Ann De Jonghe. – I am a member of World Solidarity, which is an NGO working on labour rights. My question is

about human rights and labour rights, which were often mentioned as core values in the new framework. Were these rights mentioned and discussed in the September meeting of the High-Level Panel? Secondly, what is your opinion on how we can make sure that human rights are respected in other countries throughout the world? Although some tools are available within the International Labour Organization, how can we make sure that they are not just values, but effective tools in the new framework, to ensure that these basic rights are respected?

Mrs Ellen Johnson Sirleaf. – I think that the most overarching action that can be taken to protect human rights is to ensure that there is no discrimination in the constitution and in the laws. Everyone has the individual right under the constitution and laws to exercise his/her rights as long as it done within a peaceful society. Preferences are to be respected. Today, human rights are not just given, as they may have been in the past, meaning that countries that are disposed to allowing human rights would do so, and when not so disposed, would deny and infringe on these rights. Today these rights are demanded by civil society. Vibrant civil societies, individuals and organizations are everywhere integrated through networks, where they support each other. Yes, there will be some infringement from time to time, even in your society, even in developed societies. But as long as the rule of law prevails when there is an infringement, someone has recourse through the laws and through the courts to protect his/her rights. There has been a lot of improvement in the world, and, as a matter of fact, the very United Nations, to which all our countries are members, had a principle of non-interference in internal affairs of a country by somebody else. A sovereign state had every

right to do what it wanted to do. Fortunately, today, the policy is to protect, allowing nations to intervene even militarily into a sovereign state to protect people. This is a huge change in international relationships.

Ms Emilie Peeters. – I represent Action for Global Health, which is a cross-European network working on health and advocating for health within the European Development Cooperation. You mentioned at the beginning how important health is within the new framework, but we, as health organizations, are a little bit concerned because in the current MDGs we still have three goals on health: Maternal health, Child health, and HIV and Malaria. However, there is information circulating that there would be only one in the future framework. So I was wondering what your view is on this, and how do you foresee that we can maintain the specific attention to HIV and sexual reproductive health care, if there is only one health goal and no longer three?

Mrs Ellen Johnson Sirleaf. – Clearly, the issue of health is very important in achieving our goals, and health indicators will have to be included in the new framework. Now, whether they will be retained as they are in the MDGs, with three major areas, or whether there will be some combination of some of those, we have to recognize that new health issues have also arisen, such as disabilities. I do not really know what will come out of this, to tell the truth. Nonetheless, I do believe that the consultation will be able to guide the Panel, and, at the end of the day, no matter what framework comes out, that framework has to be aggregated on a national basis to reflect national

circumstances and national priorities. Certainly, health will remain paramount on the agenda for going forward.

Mr Jan De Volder. – I represent the Community of Sant'Egidio, which has been active in peace making in many different regions of Africa, including Liberia before the Accra Process. My question is on peace and stability in western Africa, as today we have some very worrying situations in Mali, the Sahel and even Ivory Coast, where there are pockets of instability. You represent a country that has achieved peace and will be celebrating its tenth anniversary of peace next year, but my question is: what is your stance on these conflicts and what role will your country, the region, and ECOWAS have?

Mrs Ellen Johnson Sirleaf. – ECOWAS has been firm and steadfast in its response to the Mali crisis. There will be no acceptance of any regime change through violent means; it has to come about through a democratic process. Democracy has therefore to be restored in Mali. The situation has been made more complicated by what is happening in the north, where the territorial integrity of the country is being challenged. Again, ECOWAS' response has been very strong, where we have intervened and mediators have been appointed. I do recognize that there have been some slippages and some unsuccessful attempts at compromises for peace, but the key decision to restore democracy in Mali, to ensure that their territory is maintained, remains unchanged. Work is being done on the peace process. We hoped, of course, that military intervention would be a last resort, but today the Security Council has given its support to intervene. However, the Mediator, who is President of Faso, will try to find a way, and this Sunday there

is an ECOWAS Summit to deal with the issues, whether it is Mali, Guinea-Bissau, or others. Do not forget that many external factors impact on the security situation on our continent. Whatever is happening in Libya and Syria finds a way across our borders, whether they are guns that move across or insurgents that move across. That is why, when we talk about the interdependence, we must all protect each other from the negative upshots of drug trafficking and human trafficking. We say we want to have international control on guns, but we in Africa do not produce arms; you do, and the weapons enter our territories! Why is there not an international law to forbid this? A treaty has been under discussion for the last decade but we have not been able to get the arms producers to agree to have a moratorium on their production. Nevertheless, we continue to work on peace and the democratic process.

Mrs Sabine de Bethune. – I would like to thank you, Mrs President. I think it is now time to conclude. Again, thank you for this open exchange, in which you have accepted to share your views with the MPs and the civil society organizations that have joined us. Of course, we cannot formulate any conclusion for the themes we have raised today, as the problems are so large. But we all agree, and have understood your message that we, as Belgian citizens and politicians, and European citizens and politicians, have to make additional efforts. This conclusion has very concrete implications and we all know that we have a lot of work to do.