

## Newsmaker: Ellen Johnson Sirleaf



Last month's sexual assault of an 8-year-old girl by four boys ranging in age from 9 to 14 has placed President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf's Liberia in the spotlight. The crime did not occur in Liberia, though. It happened in Phoenix, Arizona. The connection to Liberia is in the reaction of the victim's family; they believed that their daughter had brought shame on them. The families of the victim and the alleged assailants are from Liberia.

Liberia is in northwest Africa, where it sits on the coast of the North Atlantic Ocean. According to the CIA's World Fact book, it is a bit larger in size than Tennessee and has an estimated population of about 3.4 million people.

The country's last 30 years include a coup d'état, a bloody civil war in which rape was used as a weapon, a series of un-elected leaders, Charles Taylor's rise to power (he currently stands accused of war crimes at The Hague), and, at long last, a 2003 peace agreement. That 2003 agreement led to a transitional government and then to elections in 2005.

In November 2005 Ellen Johnson Sirleaf was declared the winner of a run-off election, making her the first Black woman to be elected head of State of any country in the world. Other Black women have served as non-elected heads of State, including, in Liberia, Ruth Perry.

President Johnson Sirleaf was sworn into office in January 2006. Laura Bush and Condoleezza Rice attended the ceremony. Mrs. Bush has described President Johnson Sirleaf as "a magnificent leader and an amazing woman." *Time.com* (April 30, 2006).

Her term lasts for 6 years, and a Liberian president is eligible to run for a second term. Whether President Johnson Sirleaf will be able to run in November 2011 remains to be seen. While she appears to be a bright light in a place too long in the dark, she has a long political history in Liberia and it landed her on the list of "political leaders and financiers of different warring factions" whom that country's Truth and Reconciliation Commission recommended should be barred from public service for 30 years.

Johnson Sirleaf did at one point support Charles Taylor's efforts to remove the then-President from power. And, at various times, she found herself exiled and charged with assorted crimes – including a charge of treason following her second place finish to Taylor in the 1996 elections. Whether Johnson Sirleaf was guilty of the crimes of which she was accused or whether she was the victim of an unstable and non-law-based government is beyond the scope of this piece. For our purposes, she is the leader of Liberia now. And, she has spoken out against the assault of that little girl in Phoenix.

CNN.com reports that rape was a tool of war in Liberia, and that more than 60% of women in that country may have been victims of sexual assault. Gang rape was outlawed, but it was not until after Johnson Sirleaf assumed the presidency that rape was also outlawed. President Johnson Sirleaf has made prosecuting rapists and changing attitudes about rape a priority. She is on record as saying Liberia is different today, that rape is not acceptable, and, essentially, that the Liberian connection does not excuse the crime in Phoenix.

On other fronts, President Johnson-Sirleaf has worked to reduce corruption, to have United Nations sanctions lifted, and to improve relations with other countries. She is seeking debt relief, and, according to her official website, she "is now entrusted with the most challenging task any Liberian leader has ever faced – rebuilding a post-conflict nation." To achieve this, "[t]hrough her leadership, the government has identified four pillars in

support of its development agenda: Peace and Security, Economic Revitalization, Governance and the Rule of Law, and Basic Infrastructure and Services.” See [www.emansion.gov.lr](http://www.emansion.gov.lr) (president’s biography).

Ellen Johnson Sirleaf was born in Monrovia, Liberia on October 29, 1938. At age 17 she married James Sirleaf. She has four sons and seven grandchildren. Her education is in economics, accounting, and public policy. She holds a Master of Public Administration from the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University. She has held a variety of positions of leadership in government and in the international world of banking and finance. Additionally, Johnson Sirleaf has served on numerous boards and committees, and has received several awards. President George W. Bush awarded her the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 2007.