

## Ellen Johnson Sirleaf

Former President of Liberia and Africa's first elected female head of state; Nobel Peace Laureate; a leading promoter of peace, justice and democratic rule; a voice for freedom; and advocate for health for all.

- President of Liberia, 2006-2018
- Nobel Peace Laureate, 2011
- Joined the Elders, 2019
- Member of the *Campaign for Nature's* Global Steering Committee, 2020 –
- Co-chair of the *Independent Panel for Pandemic Preparedness and Response*, 2020 –

*"The world can only defeat a global pandemic with a global solution."*

– President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf

### Work with The Elders

Since joining The Elders in January 2019, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf has been a strong voice for women's role in peacebuilding and in promoting a collective rights-based response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

In 2020, President Sirleaf signed a letter to the G20 with her fellow Elders calling for coordination on health and the economy; she made a public statement on the need for bold multilateralism to drive the global response to COVID-19; and gave a speech at the unveiling of the 2021 Doomsday Clock, warning that existential challenges such as nuclear threats, pandemics and climate change all demand urgent action.

Drawing on her experience as President leading Liberia through the Ebola crisis, President Sirleaf addressed the UK Foreign Affairs Select Committee in June 2020 on how the fight against COVID-19 must be a global effort driven and the importance of ending the wave of public disinformation about the pandemic.

To mark the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of UN resolution 1325, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, alongside her fellow Elders Lakhdar Brahimi and Graça Machel, participated in a three-day virtual event that brought together female mediators from across the Arab world, government officials and peacebuilding experts to assess the obstacles and opportunities for women in peacebuilding. In June 2019, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf joined Chair Mary Robinson and Deputy Chair Ban Ki-moon

in an event organised by the Council of Foreign in New York to discuss the vital role of a well-functioning multilateral system and how it can prevent conflicts before they turn violent.

### **Africa's first elected female head of state**

Following over a decade of exile during Liberia's civil war, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf returned to the country in 2003 and oversaw preparations for democratic elections. She was elected President in 2005, vowing to end corruption, establish unity, and rebuild Liberia's devastated infrastructure.

During the civil war, Liberia had become one of the world's poorest nations with crippling levels of unemployment. As President, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf immediately sought debt amelioration and the lifting of trade sanctions from the international community. By late 2010, Liberia's entire debt had been erased.

President Sirleaf also established a right to free, universal primary education and secured funding for a new national university. In 2017, President Sirleaf retired after two full terms in office. This ensured the country's first peaceful, democratic transition of power in 73 years in January 2018. A month later, she was awarded the prestigious Ibrahim Prize for Achievement in African Leadership – a prize awarded to democratically-elected African leaders who leave office at the end of their constitutionally mandated terms.

### **Promoter of peace, justice and democracy**

In 2011, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, alongside women's rights campaigners Leymah Gbowee of Liberia and Tawakkul Karman of Yemen. She was awarded the prize for her contribution to "securing peace in Liberia, to promoting economic and social development, and to strengthening the position of women".

President Sirleaf remained committed to freedom, peace and democracy for Liberia during several periods of exile and imprisonment while extreme violence ravaged the country.

Upon her return to Liberia, she played an active role in the Transitional Government as the country recovered from the civil war and she chaired the Governance Reform Commission of the Transitional Government that was instrumental in preparing the country for its first democratic elections.

### **Advocate for inclusive healthcare**

Since stepping down as President, and building on lessons learned during the Ebola epidemic, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf has become a staunch advocate for community health workers and free primary healthcare as a means to protect against the spreading of infectious diseases.

During the civil war, Liberia's healthcare infrastructure was severely damaged, with less than half of the population having any access to medical care by 2003. President Sirleaf helped rebuild the healthcare system through new clinics, schools and training centres.

Following the Ebola epidemic, she launched a national community health assistance programme to serve more than 4 000 communities in the most remote areas, recognising that primary healthcare providers are best positioned to spot the early signs of outbreaks.

Since the outbreak of COVID-19, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf has taken up the position as Co-chair of the *Independent Panel for Pandemic Preparedness and Response* (IPPR), an independent body tasked with providing an evidence-based path for the future to ensure that countries and institutions can effectively address health threats, and she continues to promote vaccine equity and a fair distribution of vaccines across the globe.