

Liberia prez to pay tribute to Liberian market woman

Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, the first woman elected president of Liberia – and the first woman elected head of state in Africa – comes to New York City Wednesday, June 4 to pay tribute to that country's market women and the extraordinary role African women play in economic development by launching the Sirleaf Market Women's Fund's (SMWF) Adopt-a-Market Campaign.

The goal of the campaign is to bolster Liberia's economy and empower the market women and their families by building or reconstructing at least 10 more markets this year and up to 50 markets over the next four years.

According to President Sirleaf, herself the granddaughter of a market woman, "These women labor under very difficult conditions.... They feed the nation by farming, by storing the food, by selling the food sometimes under the most difficult of situations. Sometimes you go into the marketplace and see them in the sun and the rain. They sit there selling their wares to be able to put a meal on the table for their family at night, to be able to send their children to school."

The event will celebrate these remarkable women. President Sirleaf will be joined by Actress Cicely Tyson, and by SMWF honorary co-chairs: the Honorable Mary Robinson, former president of Ireland and former high commissioner of the UN High Commission for Human Rights, and Wangari Maathai, the 2004 Nobel Peace Laureate who founded Kenya's Greenbelt Movement.

They will be joined by philan-

thropists Peter and Jennifer Buffett of the NoVo Foundation, supporters of the SMWF campaign; and two Liberian market women brought to New York especially for this event by the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM).

The evening will begin with a VIP reception and silent auction of items from the Eric Robertson African Art Galleries. This will be followed by a program, including entertainment. Ms. Tyson will speak about her experience visiting Liberian market women with President Sirleaf as a member of billionaire Robert Johnson's delegation to Liberia last year. There will also be a marketplace where quilts and other items made by Liberian women will be sold.

The gala is co-sponsored by the Sirleaf Market Women's Fund and the African Women's Development Fund-USA (AWDF-USA) in collaboration with the New York Society for Ethical Culture, and United Social Services, Inc. The event will take place at the New York Society for Ethical Culture, 2 West 64th Street in New York City.

Ticket prices range between \$50 and \$500 for the program only. An exclusive question and answer period will be held with the market women after the main program for those who purchase tickets for \$500 or above. Those purchasing tickets for \$1,000 or more are able to attend the VIP reception as well.

During the catastrophic civil war that raged from 1989 to 2003, Liberia's market women not only fed the nation, they also prayed, protested and politicked for peace. When the fighting stopped they



Ellen Johnson Sirleaf

organized to elect "Ma Ellen," the granddaughter of a market woman and an international economist. President Sirleaf took office in January 2006.

President Sirleaf attributes her election to the market women. To repay and honor them for everything they had suffered and accomplished during long years of hardship, "Ma Ellen" pledged to rebuild or build new markets for them. In New York, just days after her election, supporters of Liberia and Africa decided the best way they could assist in this effort would be to establish the Sirleaf Market Women's Fund as an affiliate of the AWDF-USA.

In 2007, its first year of operation, SMWF surveyed 1,726 marketers to determine their needs. As

a result, ten markets have been built or rebuilt – two in the capital, Monrovia, and eight in the countryside. Reconstruction includes micro-credit, literacy and entrepreneurial training, clean water, sanitation, electricity, health care and nursery schools. Since many market women lost their husbands to the long war or AIDS the women were forced to become sole providers for their extended families. On average they earn less than \$1 a day.

SMWF's International Advisory Committee includes: Dr. Reverend Calvin Butts, III, pastor of the Abyssinian Baptist Church; Howard Dodson, Chief of the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture; Dr. Ruth B. Love, president, RBL Enterprises; Barbara A.

McKinzie, Centennial International President, Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc.; Stephanie Vickers, president, Friends of Liberia; and Dr. Cornel West of Princeton University. Contributions to the Sirleaf Market Women's Fund are tax deductible through the 501(c)(3) tax-exempt status of the African Women's Development Fund-USA. For more information visit <http://www.smwf.org>.

The African Women's Development Fund based in Ghana (AWDF) is the first continent-wide grant-making foundation in Africa which supports local, national and regional organizations in Africa working towards women's empowerment. AWDF through institutional capacity building and programme development seeks to build a culture of learning and partnerships within the African women's movement.

The vision of AWDF is for African women to live in a world in which there is social justice, equality and respect for women's human rights. To this end, its mission is to mobilize financial resources to support local, national and regional initiatives led by women, which will lead to the achievement of this vision in the following thematic areas: women's human rights, political participation, peace building, health and reproductive rights, HIV/AIDS, and economic development.

Since its inception in 2000, the African Women's Development Fund has awarded over \$7.8 million in grants to 575 women's organizations in 41 African countries. Its sister affiliate, New York City-based AWDF-USA, serves as SMWF's fiscal agent and is one of its earliest contributors. For more information visit <http://www.awdf.org>.