

**Statement by Acting Assistant Secretary Donald Yamamoto  
“The Future of Democracy and Governance in Liberia”  
House Foreign Affairs Committee  
Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health, Global Human Rights, and  
International Organizations**

**September 13, 2017**

Good afternoon, and thank you, Mr. Chairman, and members of the Committee, for the opportunity to testify. The United States and Liberia share a special bond that dates to the first days of Liberia’s republic, and today that bond is stronger than ever.

Since the end of the Liberian civil war in 2003, the country has improved security for its people, held three free and fair national elections, and taken on the difficult tasks of rebuilding its economy and strengthening its education and health care systems. Although the 2014-2015 Ebola epidemic had a massive human impact and slowed economic growth, a worldwide response led by the United States helped Liberia overcome Ebola and return the country to the path of building confidence.

It is hard to overstate the enormity of the challenge President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf inherited in 2005. We applaud the respect she has demonstrated for Liberia’s constitution throughout her tenure, and the positive example she

has set for the continent of Africa in her unbending respect for Presidential term limits.

Next month, Liberia's citizens will go to the polls to facilitate Liberia's first peaceful transition of power between democratically-elected leaders since 1944. This election is critical, not just for what the transition represents but because it will give Liberians the opportunity to elect a President well-equipped to lead the country towards a peaceful and prosperous future. Despite how far Liberia has come, many challenges remain that will fall to President Sirleaf's successor to address.

This afternoon, I would like to discuss Liberia's election process, its political transition, and some areas for sustained attention moving forward. While it is not the role of the United States to predict a winner, three things are clear: the Liberian Government is committed to and prepared for a smooth transition of power, the next President of Liberia will continue to contend with governance challenges, and the United States will remain committed to working with the new administration in Liberia to overcome these challenges.

## **Elections and Security**

The presidential candidates vying to replace Sirleaf have been campaigning vigorously since the start of the formal campaign period at the end of July.

We are pleased that 20 registered political parties declared their commitment to a peaceful electoral process, and many of them reaffirmed this commitment on the margins of the ECOWAS Summit in June 2017.

While the United States does not support any specific party or candidate, we are pleased to see robust participation in this election. Liberians from all walks of life are aware of the importance of these elections and the United States stands by those committed to supporting a peaceful, credible, and transparent electoral process.

Despite very real challenges, President Sirleaf and her administration are committed to conducting a peaceful, credible, and transparent election. The government has also taken steps to build systems and processes, led by a Governance Commission, for the handover of power that will occur in January 2018.

There are significant challenges still facing the National Elections Commission (NEC), notably poor infrastructure, inadequate funding, and heavy rain that could complicate election logistics. However, we are encouraged that the NEC successfully carried out a free and fair legislative by-election this past February.

We are providing comprehensive programming support to the Liberian National Elections Commission (NEC), civil society organizations, and media outlets in the run-up to the 2017 elections. In addition, our Ambassador is meeting with candidates running for president to emphasize the importance of peaceful elections, and a transition in government that builds upon the progress made in the last 12 years.

As UNMIL looks to close out its mandate at the end of March 2018, it should be considered a success story. It has kept the peace, and gradually but steadily transferred key responsibilities back to the government. The UN Mission in Liberia presently is mandated notably to protect civilians, advise the Liberian National Police on elections security, and promote sustainable peace through its radio station.

Since July 2016, the Government of Liberia has been fully responsible for internal security, and we have seen no discernable change in the security situation since then. A Joint Security Task Force, chaired by the Liberian National Police, is also actively overseeing election security planning. This is a positive sign for prospects of maintaining peace and stability during and after the election period.

### **Governance**

The next President of Liberia will inherit a more stable and secure Liberia than that which President Sirleaf inherited in 2005. While some drivers of instability have diminished, others will need continued attention. These include deficiencies in the administration of justice; official corruption; land disputes; inter-tribal, inter-ethnic, and inter-religious tensions; poverty coupled with income disparity; and a large youth population disproportionately affected by unemployment.

Liberia has come a long way in rebuilding state institutions after years of conflict. Nevertheless, the gains are fragile and there is still room for much improvement. Official and systemic corruption drains limited public

resources, deters foreign investment, and contributes to a culture in which working in government can be perceived more as a route to self-enrichment than public service. There is a continued need to strengthen institutions critical to democratic governance to ensure improvements are sustained.

As we look ahead, I can assure you the United States remains steadfast in its support for the people of Liberia in their efforts to consolidate further democratic gains, ensure their government remains accountable to its citizens, reduce corruption, and ensure the responsible stewardship of scarce public resources. We will also continue to work with other donors to make available more affordable, reliable power to the people of Liberia, which is key to Liberia's post-Ebola recovery.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, the Government of Liberia has signaled its commitment to a free, fair, and transparent election in October, with a possible second round in November; and to an historic, peaceful, democratic transition of power.

Notwithstanding logistical challenges in completing the electoral process and even greater challenges facing the victors, we look to Liberia's election as another positive step forward for democracy in West Africa.

I would like to thank you, Mr. Chairman, and members of the Committee for your continued interest, and for all the efforts and support that you have dedicated to Liberia and the region. As its largest bilateral partner, the United States will continue to be instrumental in helping the new Government of Liberia move forward.

I welcome your questions on my testimony or any others you might have for me at this time.