

Liberia

AMBASSADOR MILTON NATHANIEL BARNES

LIBERIA'S AMBASSADOR & PERMANENT
REPRESENTATIVE TO THE UNITED NATIONS



Ambassador Barnes began his professional career with The Insurance Company of Africa in Monrovia, after extensive training in management and insurance operations at affiliate company offices in Des Moines, Iowa, and Philadelphia, Pennsylvania United States of America. He returned to Liberia in December 1979 and managed the underwriting function of the Property and Casualty Division of the company. He and his wife Dawn left Liberia in July of 1980 as a result of the violent coup d'état in April 1980. They settled in Nashville TN., where he got a job at a major Telecommunications and Network company as an analyst in the corporation's treasury department. Over the nearly fourteen years at that company, he rose quickly through the management ranks; working in financial management, internal control and marketing. After leaving the corporation in 1996, he ran a successful telecommunications consulting firm.

In April 1998 Ambassador Barnes fulfilled his desire to return to Liberia where he started as an analyst at the Ministry of Finance.

In March 1999 he was appointed to the National Social Security and Welfare Corporation (NASSCORP) as Director General. In only a six-month period at NASCORP, he was able to completely transform the corporation from a debt ridden, under-funded entity into a more

efficient one, by streamlining its workforce, challenging and motivating the management team and aggressively negotiating with creditors. In addition, he established a dynamic program to initiate an insurance reserve.

In September of 1999, Ambassador Barnes was appointed as Minister of Finance, Republic of Liberia, and held that position until July 2002. In that capacity, he became the chief architect of Liberia's fiscal program. During his tenure as Minister, he oversaw and implemented a new Tax Code for Liberia in consultation with the Fiscal Affairs Department of the International Monetary Fund. During his tenure as Minister of Finance of Liberia, he conceptualized and developed a proposal for Summit of Post-Conflict nations in Africa. At the Summit issues relevant to member nations' peculiar and unique experiences would be analyzed with the objective of formulating a plan for post-conflict reconstruction and rehabilitation. This plan was submitted to the global institutions through the African Development Bank for consideration. Ambassador Barnes developed a strong management team at the ministry and tasked, challenged and motivated all one thousand six hundred plus employees to new levels of productivity and excellence.

In May 2006, M. Nathaniel Barnes was appointed Ambassador & Permanent Representative to the United

Nations, Republic of Liberia. He views this challenge as another opportunity to serve his country in its bid to re-enter into the global comity of nations while pursuing its strategic economic, social and political objectives. Ambassador Barnes believes that "The thrust of our efforts here at the United Nations will be rebuilding our traditional relationships and forging new ones on a foundation of trust, understanding and mutual respect. Of course the primary focus will be how we utilize these mutually beneficial relationships to serve Liberia's economic, social and political interest."

While there are a variety of approaches that Ambassador Barnes uses to realize his objectives, his fundamental goal is singular: to make a positive impact on the lives of Liberian people and indeed the lives of people of Africa. He believes in collective effort in dealing with the complex challenges of the continent of African and as such involves himself and mission staff on conferences and group studies on how to find solutions to problems that are peculiar to the continent.

Ambassador Barnes was one of the speakers on the African Diaspora Foundation (ADF) Global leadership Peace Summit in Los Angeles from 3rd through the 7th of October 2007. The theme of the conference was "Peace Education" in schools and grass root levels of the communities in Africa as sure way of healing the broken lives of people and conflict stricken communities of the continent. This is one language the

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Ambassador understands fairly well, as a Liberian he was forced to migrate to the USA from 1980 through 1998 as a result of coups and civil wars in his country Liberia.

Western Africa Magazine had the privilege and perfect opportunity of meeting the Ambassador at the LA summit and he granted us this interview. He is a professional and a gentleman.

INTERVIEW WITH AMBASSADOR M. NATHANIEL BARNES

WAM: President Ellen Johnson is the first elected female president in Liberia and indeed in the history of politics in Africa. How is she coping working in a male dominated career?

AMB: Based on Her Excellency Ellen Johnson Sirleaf's progress over the last eighteen months, it is quite apparent that she is fairing quite well in a male dominated career and culture. I think a large part of her success has been her ability to create a management and governance team that spans the social, economic and political spectrum - basically, a team of inclusion which empowers both men and women to exercise their required functions to their fullest potential in the interest of Liberia regardless of partisan politics.

On the continent, President Sirleaf seems to fit in well with her male colleagues as

they appear to have adjusted to the politics of change.

WAM: In January 1996 when she was inaugurated as the president of Liberia, most critics questioned her qualifications and ability to handle the office of the presidency of Liberia? What would be your response to those critics by now?

AMB: I don't feel that there was ever any question or doubt about Mrs. Sirleaf's technical capacity. It is clear from her experience and background that her work at the United Nations, The World Bank and several reputable international financial institutions left her more than well prepared technically to handle the demands of the office. There may have been some questions about her earlier political affiliations and approaches in some critic's minds, but it appears that she is working towards allaying all fears in that regard.

WAM: The African Union just concluded the 9th Ordinary Session of the Assembly of the Heads of States and Governments in Accra Ghana in July 2007; the main agenda was the integration of the African continent into United States of Africa; how do you see this ideology of United States of Africa? What would be the benefits to the African member States?

AMB: Conceptually, a United States of Africa is an excellent idea; however, I personally believe that member states of the African Union must first get their own houses in order before

we can talk about such a union. In other words, each member state must have economic, social and political stability before a United States of Africa can be seriously considered and pursued. Additionally, it may be more practical to begin with solid nation states followed by united regions and finally, a united African continent.

Having said that, there are several areas such as immigration, customs rationalization and trade within which we can move quickly. The concept of a United States of Africa should be aggressively pursued bearing in mind that the most recent model of unionization, the European Union, took decades to finally come to full realization.

A unified Africa will certainly be a stronger and more influential Africa from a global perspective. Benefits to member states would first and foremost be improved security. Secondly, members could expect significant economic benefits through integration and more efficient utilization of our natural resources. Members could also reap benefits by developing and retaining intellectual properties as opposed to importing it. Lastly and most importantly, such a union could bring with it the potential to consolidate and expand middle class wealth which is sadly lacking in Africa today.

WAM: What do you foresee as possible challenges to the successful integration of African States into a United States of Africa?

AMB: All of the challenges, in

my opinion, are political as the cultural, economic and social barriers could be rationalized and overcome. Addressing the wide-range of political ideologies and the tremendous egos of our leaders will, however, present a formidable challenge.

WAM: As a seasoned politician from Africa; how do you think the west would react to the possible integration of all African States into United States of Africa?

AMB: While the reaction of the west is a factor that must be considered, I think their reaction should be secondary. The destiny of Africa should be determined by Africans. This is a bold statement because, in the past, decisions have not always been made on the basis of Africa's strategic interests. We must insist that our external partners understand and accept that Africans are quite capable of determining their own future. From here on in, decisions concerning Africa's future should be made in Africa, by Africans for Africans rather than within foreign contexts that can never fully appreciate our problems. This does not mean that we should build a wall around ourselves. A United States of Africa must participate fully as a valued partner in the global community.

WAM: Darfur has been a total disaster that both African Leaders and equally the United Nations have not been able to handle the situation; what are we not doing right as leaders?

AMB: As leaders, we are missing the humanity factor in

the Darfur equation. What I mean by this is that the decisions of many of those involved are political decisions that entail mitigation of risks rather than saving human lives. Leaders need to be called to the moral carpet and mediation must be done in total neutrality. At the end of the day, there must be a sense of urgency as human beings are continuing to suffer and die. It would be a pity to have failed to learn the lessons from Rwanda.

WAM: You are the Liberian permanent representative in the United Nations; how is the UN taking the ideology of African States integrating into a United States of Africa.

AMB: I think the U.N. is taking the idea of a United States of Africa very positively because they see the value of dealing and negotiating with a centralized entity similar to the E.U. I also believe that they see it as a potential strengthening of Africa's strategic position at the U.N.

WAM: How far has the Liberian Government been able to restore peace and security in Liberia since after the lengthy civil?

AMB: Thanks to our multi-lateral and bi-lateral partners, there is presently peace and security in Liberia. This is underpinned by the 15,000 member strong international peacekeeping force that is deployed throughout the country under the auspices of the United Nations Mission in Liberia (UNMIL). In addition, the police and army of the

Government of Liberia are being re-structured and re-trained in concert with the United States and several of our bi-lateral partners. A draw down plan has been agreed to by all of the parties and will be done over a minimum period of three years fully cognizant of the newly trained national security forces ability to adequately fill in the gaps as international peacekeepers leave.

WAM: The international community placed embargo on diamond trade with Liberia during the civil war; has that been lifted and if so can you comment on the trade?

AMB: The Security Council of the U.N. has lifted its sanctions on both timber and diamonds in Liberia. This was done after Liberia met all of the established benchmarks that would insure better monitoring and control within these two industry sectors. The removal of the sanctions will certainly create investment and employment opportunities both of which are critical for Liberia's economic future.

WAM: The lengthy war destroyed basic infrastructures like road network, communication network etc; how has the government been coping with the reconstruction of these infrastructures?

AMB: There are several challenges the Government of Liberia now faces with regards to infrastructure. The first is quickly converting the goodwill and commitment of the international community into tangible

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deliverable projects. We must find ways to cut through the bureaucracy and red tape in order to make resources for our reconstruction more quickly available. The second is a matter of timing given the climate issue in Liberia. We only have a seven month dry season during which we expect to make rapid progress in the construction of roads, bridges, hospitals, schools, etc.

WAM: Can you comment on the government rehabilitation programmes for the returnees after the lengthy war? Is the government receiving any assistance from the international community in this regards?

AMB: Our Return and Resettlement Program has been successful largely because of the efforts and programmes of our national and international NGO partners. These entities have helped to compensate for the Government's inadequate resources to address this problem. The challenge we now face is providing housing, medical and educational facilities to accommodate our returnees.

WAM: There was massive gap in the education system of the country due to the 14 years of civil wars; how is the government's education programmes designed to address to the huge gap?

AMB: The largest portion of our national budget is dedicated toward education - that is facilities, teacher training and school supplies. The government's programmes are

buttressed by significant efforts by private sector educational programs including churches and other faith-based entities. President Sirleaf's Liberia Education Trust, for example, has an ambitious program to build fifty new schools, train 500 teachers and provide 5,000 academic scholarships over the next three years. My wife and I are personally involved in the education of children in under-served communities in Liberia. Additionally, we are actively involved in negotiations with American institutions of higher education to collaborate with the Ministry of Education of Liberia for the provision of scholarships - specifically in the sciences; teacher and student exchanges; and the rehabilitation of our College of Science and Technology in south eastern Liberia. The educational challenges are enormous and will require focus, tenacity and hard work for which the Government of Liberia is now preparing.

WAM: What is the state of the national health services? How are the hospitals and clinics coping with public demand?

AMB: There is substantial strain on our health care delivery systems and, like education; this area carries very high priority with the Government. There has also been unprecedented collaboration and support from international entities in the meeting the health demands in post-conflict Liberia. There are several drives both in Liberia and the Liberian Diaspora to raise resources and bring in periodic expertise to address the

demands in Liberia. We have a long way to go in this area; but, I believe the Government has the proper focus to eventually meet the objective of delivering quality healthcare to all Liberians in the foreseeable future.

WAM: How would you describe the standard of living of the average Liberian on the streets of Monrovia today?

AMB: Unfortunately, the standard of living of the average Liberian on the streets of Monrovia today is still extremely difficult. Our present circumstances are a result of not only many years of civil war but even more years of neglect and mismanagement. Overcoming these will take time, patience, and sacrifice.

WAM: What would you say are the greatest challenges of the government of President of Ellen Johnson?

AMB: The greatest challenges of the Government of President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf are managing expectations, curbing corruption, creating a predictable economic environment and delivering basic services to the people. Interestingly, close analysis of all of these priorities would indicate interconnectedness. Changing attitudes and behaviour will go a long way in addressing these priorities.

WAM: What is the political climate in Liberia and when is the next political election in Liberia?

AMB: The political climate in Liberia can be described as

stable with opposition parties still in a “wait and see” posture. Because, most Liberians are so tired of crisis and war, they seem to be willing to wait patiently for positive change to be evident. However, no one is willing to wait forever; and the Government needs to deliver basic services and jobs urgently. The next General and Presidential elections are scheduled for 2011.

WAM: Do you have any final comments to conclude this

interview?

AMB: Liberia is entering a renaissance with a new attitude, a new breed of leaders and indestructible hope to build on. The Liberian people have proven themselves to be tenacious and resilient and they are beginning to make it quite evident that they will no longer tolerate impunity, tyranny, injustice and corruption. The future leaders of Liberia must be prepared to present themselves as true servants who are not only

well-prepared but who exhibit the qualities of selflessness, patriotism and vision to take Liberia into a new era of social and economic prosperity. This should serve as adequate warning to anyone ambitious for leadership in Liberia who may harbour anything other than the purest of intentions.

WAM: Thank you so much for your time and on behalf of Western Africa Magazine, we welcome you and wish you the very best of days in New York.

Ambassador Barnes and wife

