

INSIDE AFRICA

Is [REDACTED] Exploiting Liberian Workers?; Interview With Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf

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FEMI OKE, HOST: Hello, and welcome to a very special edition of INSIDE AFRICA. I'm Femi Oke, and it's been quite a week in Liberia.

One of two presidential candidates has claimed victory, and one is crying foul. With nearly all the votes counted, Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf is far ahead of her rival, George Weah, and she seems set to become Africa's first elected female head of state.

We have an interview with Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf just later on in the program, but for now we go to the Liberian town of Harbel, where human rights groups say U.S.-based [REDACTED] must take steps to improve the living conditions of workers on its rubber plantation. Activists say the workers are underpaid and overworked and are turning now to an unusual source to help them complete their heavy workload.

(BEGIN VIDEOTAPE)

OKE (voice-over): These youngsters are just finishing work on a Liberian rubber plantation in West Africa. They spent all day, as they do seven days a week, helping their father. He earns \$3.19 day from [REDACTED] before tax and deductions. To tap rubber for car tires and other latex products like surgical gloves, workers shave a thin layer of bark of every tree, and then return to collect the latex, which drips into a cup.

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: The work we do here - they (INAUDIBLE) is very high. The (INAUDIBLE) a day, you have to tap it. Tapping (INAUDIBLE).

OKE: Even though Liberia does have child labor laws and [REDACTED] has banned children from tapping trees, workers say the ban isn't enforced. The workers say the only way they can complete their daily quota is to bring their children along.

Fifteen-year old [REDACTED] says he's been working at this plantation since 2003. He's not been hired, and he's not being paid.

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: And certainly every day I'm going to (INAUDIBLE). So every day, we're going to work.



civil war.

██████████: Well, I think the conditions for Liberia are actually very good. That's not to say that I'm happy with them or that I accept that.

OKE: Just down the road from some of the company-provided housing we visited, we saw well-maintained managers' bungalows and a golf course.

When we left the ██████████ plantation, ██████████ was finished for the day. His father was somewhere on the plantation, still working.

(END VIDEOTAPE)

OKE: The workers and lawyers I spoke to at the Harbel plantation were distressed by the living and working conditions or were united in their criticism of Liberia's transitional government, who they saw as being ultimately responsible. Here are some of the comments I heard at ██████████.

(BEGIN VIDEO CLIP)

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: Our leaders - we go all the past years, our (INAUDIBLE).

SAMUEL KOFI WOODS, LIBERIAN LAWYER: We have to rehumanize our country. And this is where it must really begin. This a mere reflection of what (INAUDIBLE), you know, a predatory culture, and we must change it.

(END VIDEO CLIP)

OKE: While I was in Liberia, I put these criticisms to Mr. Jackson E. Doe. He is the minister of state for presidential affairs. I asked him what benefits ██████████ had brought to Liberia?

(BEGIN VIDEO CLIP)

JACKSON E.DOE, MINISTER OF PRESIDENTIAL AFFAIRS: I don't think ██████████ has improved the lives of Liberians so much as what we expect. But on the scale, (INAUDIBLE) best to employ Liberians. So, as such, Liberians are (INAUDIBLE) to do better than what they had done in the past. For example, with the national transitional government of Liberia (INAUDIBLE), ██████████ has promised to improve their lives by building new schools, improve the health condition, and so forth.

(END VIDEO CLIP)

OKE: That was Mr. Jackson E. Doe, the minister of state for presidential affairs.

We take a break now, and when we return, the ██████████ side of the story. We hear from

a top executive of the company.

And later, an interview with Liberia's would-be president, Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf. See you on the other side.

(COMMERCIAL BREAK)

OKE: Welcome back. So, workers at [REDACTED] rubber plantation in Harbel say they're underpaid and overworked, and some said they even have to bring their children to work to help them complete the heavy workload.

[REDACTED] is president of [REDACTED]. Earlier this week, he joined us to respond to these allegations. He began by talking about the workers' claim that they're underpaid.

(BEGIN VIDEOTAPE)

[REDACTED]: Well, the wage for the average tapper is certainly higher than that. The deductions that one of our employees would have taken out of their paycheck is really the same thing that you and I might have taken out of our paychecks. Deductions for credit union, savings. In their case, they may choose to have the deductions for additional rice they may chose to purchase at company's subsidized pricing, and other things.

OKE: Children are commonly seen working in Harbel on the plantations, and I'm wondering why that would be the case.

[REDACTED]: We have very strict policies about child labor. We do not hire anybody under 18 years of age, and we discourage parents from bringing their children to the fields with them. We have a program with the Ministry of Labor in Liberia to - and also the union that represents our employees -- to educate parents about why they should not bring children with them into the field. And if we see incidents of this, we will cancel those employees, and if necessary, ultimately discipline them over such issue.

OKE: The critics of the way [REDACTED] plantation is run say that the education system is deliberately done to only educate kids up to certain level, so the only option they have is to become workers at [REDACTED]. So it's almost like a vicious circle, and some people even call it indentured labor. Tell me what your response is to that charge.

[REDACTED]: We are for education to children and now, under the new agreement, up into the high school level. Prior to this, we have had our students graduate through the [REDACTED] schools, and become ministers of government and important business leaders in the community. So I don't think that's true at all.

OKE: Now, you've just come back from Liberia, so I know you know what the living conditions are like in some parts of [REDACTED] on the plantation. How would you describe them?

██████████: Well, I think the conditions, for Liberia, are actually very good. That's not to say that I'm happy with them, or that I accept them. We are pouring millions of dollars, because of the new agreement we have with the Liberian government, into housing. And while I was there, I saw several different housing projects that were being constructed, and some of them being painted and ready to receive new families into them.

OKE: Well, that's encouraging news, but I also have seen mud huts and shanty huts and no latrines and no water and people suffering just from living day to day. So how long will that progress take so that more Firestone workers are living in better living conditions?

██████████: Well, in addition to the devastation that 15 years of civil war has caused, I think you need to understand another point -- during the 2003 fighting, we had thousands of refugees come to ██████████ for the safety that it provided. When those people came, they occupied any open area of land that was available. They put up temporary housing made out of mud, out of bamboo, out of thatch, out of tarpaulin, out of corrugated steel. Anything that they could do to get shelter. And those conditions still exist. They are not ██████████ housing, but they are on our property.

But we felt compassion for these people, and felt that we should not try to move them from this land or the safety that ██████████ provided. Eventually, one day, they will choose to return to their homelands, and those conditions will not exist anymore.

OKE: I understand what you're saying about the civil war. You only have to travel through Monrovia to see the effect of that, but some of these conditions in ██████████ have existed long before the civil war, that the conditions for workers haven't been good for decades.

██████████: Well, we have newer housing and we have older housing. One of the problems we have had, though, is that because we have not been able to get in and rebuild over the last 15 years and not had an agreement with the government to rebuild our operations that were destroyed in the civil war, we've been unable to go in and update our standards to current standards for housing. Now that we have had an agreement, we are busy at work and spending millions of dollars in that effort.

OKE: I looked on the ██████████ Web site, and there are some very glowing reports about environmental awards and what you've done to save the environment and help the environment. I've also seen reports from ██████████ that waste from the ██████████ plant is going straight into a local river, and there are communities along that river that wash in that river, that drink that river water, and they are being damaged by ██████████ environmental policies in ██████████.

██████████: Well, we have always complied with the environmental laws of Liberia. Under the new agreement we have with the government, there are additional regulations that ██████████ will be subject to, and one of those things is we will make a total

assessment of our operations, and we will develop an environmental management plan, and we'll work in conjunction with the government of Liberia to have responsible environmental practices.

OKE: So, at the moment, is the waste still going straight into the water? Is that part of the environmental policies of the Liberian government right now?

██████████: Well, right now, we have a factory that is located next to the Farmington River. There is various processing of the materials that we have in our factory. There is, as in most factories, some waste that comes from byproduct, that comes from the process, that is -- there is treatment of that, but eventually, it does process through to the Farmington River.

OKE: I appreciate the fact is that you've come in to talk to INSIDE AFRICA about these very serious complaints, and many companies would have just run or would have just issued a statement. So I appreciate that very much indeed.

But having said that, an international labor rights group actually is filing a case against ██████████ on behalf of Liberian workers. I'm just wondering how the company is going to cope with that, and what is your response?

██████████: Well, I've not seen any kind of filing against the company. I think our record of our relationship with our workers is very good. Our workers are represented by a union which bargains collectively on their behalf, and I think the relationship we have with our workers is very good.

(END VIDEOTAPE)

OKE: The president of ██████████.

And there's more to come on INSIDE AFRICA, just ahead.

(INAUDIBLE) president, Liberia's Iron Lady, joins us after the break.

(COMMERCIAL BREAK).

OKE: Hello again. Now, with over 97 percent of the ballots counted in Liberia's presidential election, Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf remains in the lead, with nearly 60 percent of the votes. But opponent George Weah and his supporters are claiming fraud, saying the elections were not free and fair. They held demonstrations on Friday, calling for new elections. Earlier, I caught up with Mrs. Johnson-Sirleaf, and she told me how she pulled off her come-from-behind victory.

(BEGIN VIDEOTAPE)

ELLEN JOHNSON-SIRLEAF, PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATE, LIBERIA: We went for

all of the voters that picked up votes from Mr. Weah in the first round. You may recall, he got some 24 percent of the votes, leaving some, you know, over 70 percent did not like his profile. And while in the first round, that 70 percent was spread among 21 other candidates, ourselves included, we knew that that represented a potential constituency we could grab, and that's exactly what we did in the second round.

OKE: Now, your opponent, George Weah, is saying that there's been some fraud involved in the runoff elections -- ballot tampering, harassment, intimidation. What grounds could he possibly have?

JOHNSON-SIRLEAF: We're confident that we played this free and fair. Even our campaign was clean, and so we are satisfied that this reflects the Liberian people's choice, and it's just unfortunate that this victory, which belongs to the Liberian people, is being marred by all these allegations. Because Liberians all over the country should be rejoicing today instead of now having to wait until these charges are cleared up, as I'm sure they will be.

OKE: The Congress for Democratic Change are actually asking for a new election. How do you get over that stumbling block?

JOHNSON-SIRLEAF: Well, let's wait for the elections commission to examine the charges, and much of this is coming from the vocal minority. I don't think there are more than a few hundred young people that were on the streets demonstrating. The rest of the people are the disciplined, quiet majority who would love to be on the streets -- that would bring them out - - we could bring them out, in the thousands, to celebrate this victory. But we've decided to advise them to rest all week, until all of this is settled, and the elections commission has made its final announcement. And then you'll see the celebration all over the country.

OKE: It's early days yet. Officially, you're still a presidential candidate, but you must have some thoughts about who you'd like in your new administration.

JOHNSON-SIRLEAF: We're going to be identifying people from all the political parties who meet our requirements of conscience and honesty, because we want the government to be one of inclusion that reflects the diversity of our nation. We certainly hope that Mr. Weah will get over his disappointment and would agree on an important role that he might play, so now we both can work together for the good of the country.

OKE: What kind of role do you think befits George Weah? He does have a huge following.

JOHNSON-SIRLEAF: Well, I don't know exactly what role he can play. I mean, but I hope one will find a role. He has a following among many of the young people, no doubt, and I think he might also have an important (ph) ability to see how in the next few years he can work towards making a major contribution to meeting some of their needs. Of course, the government, the new government has to be a government of all the people,

that will respond to the needs of all Liberians. But he can rally the youth. He could make a major contribution through that.

OKE: And finally, Mrs. Johnson-Sirleaf, you've already declared victory. Officially, you're almost on the brink of making history. How does it feel?

JOHNSON-SIRLEAF: I'll tell you, I feel very normal. Obviously, I'm pleased, for the Liberian women particularly and the women of Africa, all of whom, you know, are quite overjoyed today. I'm also pleased that I've been elected to lead the team and given an opportunity to introduce long-standing structural reform in our country. But I'm humbled by the fact that the developing challenges which we face are going to be awesome, expectations are going to be high, and I want to remain calm, realistic and moderate in everything that I do.

(END VIDEOTAPE)

OKE: And that was Liberia's would-be president-elect, Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf, talking to INSIDE AFRICA just a little while ago.

And finally this week, we dip into our mailbag, and we look at some of your letters.

(BEGIN VIDEOTAPE)

OKE (voice-over): Events in Ethiopia dominated our mailbag this month. Many of you write to comment on recent violence in the country and a report we had last weekend on the Irrecha festival of the Oromo people.

From London, Alemu writes: "I'm glad to know you're including the sad and heartbreaking events happening in Ethiopia. He goes on: "The crimes committed by the government make clear the true dictatorial nature of the ruling party."

Then he appeals to the world, noting: "We Ethiopians in the diaspora are pleading with the international community to stop the bloodbath in Ethiopia."

From Addis Ababa, Tajebe writes to commend our report on the Oromo festival. Then he adds: "But the current burning issue here in Ethiopia is those poor people fighting against the government and killed carelessly on the street. Please let the world know about us and our suffering."

Then there were some of you who just wanted to rave about the Irrecha festival. Deborah Coffey from Zurich was impressed with the Oromo belief in the sanctity of water. "I was struck by the unbroken connection those people have with each other, to life and nature through the simple awareness of water as the life-giving agent that fills and flows through all life forms."

Believe it or not, there were other letters in our mailbag. Some of you wrote to comment



on the Liberian elections. Michael Umodai: "Both candidates, Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf and George Opong Weah, to form a coalition government after the elections. Anyone that wins would have a lot of work to do, because that country is totally devastated from 14 years of civil war."

Naditha Hassan writes to commend us for our recent special on African music. Naditha said: "If musicians of today want to be remembered, they must follow the footsteps of African artists and sing about more meaningful issues. They need to focus on traditional music, struggles, hunger and things of that nature, which will make listeners feel their pain as well, and smart ones will react to it and start helping and making a difference."

(END VIDEOTAPE)

OKE: And please, keep those letters coming. The address, [insideafrica@cnn.com](mailto:insideafrica@cnn.com). And when you write, please include the country where you're writing from.

And that's all for this week's show. Thank you for joining us. Hope you can tune in again next week. I'm Femi Oke. Until the next time, take care.

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