

Nobel Peace Prize Winners Profile: Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, Leymah Gbowee



MONROVIA, Liberia ô Ellen Johnson Sirleaf and Leymah Gbowee used different tactics to confront thugs and killers in war-ravaged Liberia, with one challenging a feared warlord for the presidency and the other taking to the streets to denounce armed rapists who were preying on women.

On Friday, their brave deeds were recognized with the Nobel Peace Prize, which they shared with democratic activist Tawakkul Karman of Yemen. The prize committee in Oslo, Norway, cited their work on women's rights, describing it as fundamental to the spread of peace around the world.

"This gives me a stronger commitment to work for reconciliation," Sirleaf said Friday from her home in Monrovia after hearing of the award. *"Liberians should be proud."*

Sirleaf, 72, became Africa's first democratically elected female president in 2005, after earlier losing to notorious warlord Charles Taylor in 1997 elections. She is running for a second term on Tuesday against stiff opposition, and the Nobel could give her a needed boost.

Critics say that with all the international aid and investment, Liberia's government should have done better in restoring services and rebuilding the infrastructure ravaged by years of war in the West African nation.

Still, Bineta Diop, founder and executive director of Women Africa Solidarity, says the Nobel prize recognizes Sirleaf's *"passion and commitment"* to her people and the rebuilding of her country.

"Monrovia has begun to breathe again," Diop said. "Ms. Sirleaf has worked to fight corruption that existed before and during the war, establish laws to protect women from sexual violence, give jobs to child soldiers, and rebuild roads, hospitals and schools."

Fellow Nobel Peace laureate Desmond Tutu also said Sirleaf deserves the prize "many times over."

"She's brought stability to a place that was going to hell," he said Friday.

While Sirleaf has led in the political arena, Gbowee, 39, often took to the streets leading a group known as the "women in white."

Gbowee's assistant, Bertha Amanor, described her as a "warrior daring to enter where others would not dare."

That fearlessness was evident on a November day in 2003 when Gbowee led hundreds of female protesters through the battle-scarred capital Monrovia, demanding swift disarmament of fighters who were raping women and girls of all ages. Fourteen years of near constant civil war had ended in a peace deal three months earlier, but the rapes continued. Gbowee led the women, whose white attire symbolized hopes for peace, straight to Monrovia's City Hall.

"We the women of Liberia will no more allow ourselves to be raped, abused, misused, maimed and killed," she shouted. "Our children and grandchildren will not be used as killing machines and sex slaves!"

Two months earlier, she confronted a rebel official in another march that called on rebel and government forces to halt violence and looting.

"You're supposed to be our liberators, but if you finish everyone, who will you rule?" Gbowee asked rebel official Sekou Fofana at his headquarters.

In 2009, she won a Profile in Courage Award, an honor named for a book written by John F. Kennedy, for her work in emboldening women in Liberia.

Gbowee works in Ghana's capital as the director of Women Peace and Security Network Africa. The group's website says she also won a 2007 Blue Ribbon Award from Harvard University and was the central character of an award-winning documentary called "*Pray the Devil Back to Hell*."

She was believed to be in the United States on Friday and was not immediately available for comment.

"Leymah Gbowee worked very hard with women in Liberia from all walks of life to challenge the dictatorship, to sit in the sun and in the rain advocating for peace," Sirleaf said Friday. "I believe we both accept this on behalf of the Liberian people and the credit goes to them."

The Harvard-educated Sirleaf worked her way through college in the United States by mopping floors and waiting tables. She has been jailed at home and exiled abroad, and took on the warlord Taylor in elections in 1997. She lost by a landslide but earned the nickname

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Evidence of the savage war still remains. The country's main energy plant which was destroyed in the fighting has yet to be rebuilt. The country's main highway is in deplorable condition. Few people in the capital have electricity, running water and proper sewage.

Friday, though, was a day of pride and celebration across West Africa. In neighboring Sierra Leone, Health Minister Zainab Hawa Bangura applauded both women for their role in bringing peace to Liberia.

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Selsky reported from Johannesburg. Associated Press writers Clarence Roy-Macaulay in Freetown, Sierra Leone and Anne Look in Dakar, Senegal contributed to this report.

Liberian Nobel Winners Confronted Thugs, Killers

By ANDREW O. SELSKY and JONATHAN PAYE-LAYLEH Associated Press

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Denver Post wire reports

POSTED: 10/08/2011 01:00:00 AM MDT

UPDATED: 10/08/2011 01:08:26 AM MDT



Liberia's President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, who jointly won the Nobel Peace Prize 2011 (Hani Mohammed, The Associated Press)

CAIRO - Three women from Africa and the Middle East who symbolized nonviolent struggles to improve their nations and to advance the role of women's rights were awarded the Nobel Peace Prize on Friday.

Sharing the award were Liberian President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, Africa's first democratically elected female president; her countrywoman Leymah Gbowee, a peace activist who challenged warlords; and Tawakkul Karman, a Yemeni human-rights leader seeking to overthrow an autocratic regime as part of the nationwide Arab Spring movement.

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Yemeni activist Tawakkul Karman reacts after the announcement of the 2011 Nobel Peace Prize in Sanaa, Yemen, Friday, Oct. 7, 2011. The 2011 Nobel Peace Prize was awarded Friday to Liberian President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, Liberian peace activist Leymah Gbowee and Tawakkul Karman of Yemen for their work on women's rights. (AP | Hani Mohammed)

Thorbjorn Jagland, head of the Nobel committee, based in Oslo.

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Liberian Leymah Gbowee addresses the Columbia Business School Social Enterprise Conference on October 7, 2011 at Columbia University in New York after it was announced that she was jointly awarded the Nobel Peace Prize with Liberian President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf and Yemen's Arab Spring activist Tawakkul Karman. (Timothy A. Clary, AFP/Getty Images)

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She is known among Yemenis as "the iron woman" and the "mother of the revolution." A conservative woman fighting for change in a conservative Muslim and tribal society, Karman has been the face of the mass uprising against the authoritarian regime of President Ali Abdullah Saleh.

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When the Nobel announcement was made Friday, Karman was where she has been nearly every day for the past eight months: in a protest tent in Change Square, the roundabout in central Sana that has been the symbolic epicenter of the revolt.

"This prize is not for Tawakkul; it is for the whole Yemeni people, for the martyrs, for the cause of standing up to (Saleh) and his gangs. Every tyrant and dictator is upset by this prize because it confronts injustice," she said from her tent as she received congratulations from other activists.

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The Los Angeles Times and The Associated Press contributed to this report.

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Liberian Nobel winners confronted thugs, killers

• AP foreign, Saturday October 8 2011

JONATHAN PAYE-LAYLEH

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October 7, 2011



Liberian President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf waves at her home in the city of Monrovia, Liberia, Friday, Oct 7, 2011. Africa's first democratically elected female president, a Liberian campaigner against rape and a woman who stood up to Yemen's autocratic regime won the Nobel Peace Prize in recognition of the importance of women's rights in the spread of global peace. The 10 million kronor (\$1.5 million) award was split three ways between Liberian President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, women's rights activist Leymah Gbowee from the same African country and democracy activist Tawakkul Karman of Yemen - the first Arab woman to win the prize. (AP/Photo Abbas Dulleh)

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Sarkozy congratulates 2011 Nobel Peace Prize winners

Paris, France (PANA) - French President Nicolas Sarkozy, Friday congratulated the three women winners of the 2011 Nobel Peace Prize, saying that one of them, President Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf of Liberia, was a symbol of the rise of democracy in Africa.

President Johnson-Sirleaf, Liberian peace activist, Leyman Gbowee, and Yemeni rights activist, Tawakkul Karman, were Friday jointly awarded the 2011 Nobel Peace Prize.

"The strong commitment of President Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf for peace, social justice and development in Liberia has helped to turn the page of 14 years of violence and lawlessness," wrote the French President in a text made available to PANA in Paris, the French capital.

According to Sarkozy, Gbowee, also Liberian, illustrates the unique role of the Liberian civil society, adding that her commitment against violence, for women's rights and the protection of children, has maintained hope, even in the darkest hours.

"By distinguishing these two admirable Liberians, it is also the revival of Liberia that the Nobel Prize underscores and encourages," said Sarkozy, who expressed the wish that the forthcoming election in Liberia should confirm the strength of its young democracy and called upon all political forces in Liberia to work in this direction.

The French president also praised the Yemeni Tawakkul Karman, a co-winner with the two Liberians, believing that her distinction was a tribute to "courageous" fight of the Arab people for democracy and freedom.

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07 octobre 2011 18:49:00