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“The Future of Democracy and Governance in Liberia”

*Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health,
Global Human Rights and International Organizations
Excerpts of remarks by Rep. Chris Smith
September 13, 2017*

On the eve of the Liberian election I want to thank Congressman Dan Donovan for recommending this important hearing concerning those elections and the future of Democracy and Governance in Liberia.

Of the more than 50 nations of Africa, the United States has the closest connection with the Republic of Liberia. This is not only because Liberia was founded in 1847 by freedmen and former slaves from this country, but also because of the estimated 500,000 Liberians and Liberian descendants who live here. Liberian cities such as Monrovia and Buchanan were named for American presidents.

However, most Americans are largely unaware of the long link between the United States and Liberia and likely see Liberia as just another African country. Most Americans are unaware that Liberia has been a major U.S. ally since World War II and into the Cold War, hosting U.S. communications facilities in the 1960s and 1970s and receiving extensive U.S. development assistance, including post-war aid and post-Ebola aid to Liberia. The United States also helped Liberia build its criminal justice sector and supported transitional justice efforts.

The United State has funded just over a quarter of the cost of UNMIL, at a cost of \$106 million annually as of FY 2016. Liberia is also implementing a \$256.7 million, five-year MCC compact, signed in 2015, designed to increase access to reliable, affordable electricity and enhance the country’s poor road infrastructure. Bilateral State Department and USAID assistance totaled \$91 million in FY2016, but The Trump Administration has proposed a steep cut, to \$29 million for FY2018.

President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf has made some advancement in democracy and governance during her two terms, following the despotic rule of Charles Taylor. During his term of office, Taylor was accused of war crimes and crimes against humanity as a result of his involvement in the Sierra

Leone civil war from 1991 to 2002, but he also was responsible for serious human rights violations in Liberia. Taylor was formally indicted by the Special Court for Sierra Leone in 2003. He resigned and went into exile in Nigeria. In 2006, newly elected President Sirleaf formally requested his extradition. He was detained by UN authorities in Sierra Leone and then at the Penitentiary Institution Haaglanden in The Hague, awaiting trial by the Special Court. He was found guilty in April 2012 of all eleven charges levied by the Special Court, including terror, murder and rape, and in May 2012, Taylor was sentenced to 50 years in prison.

The United States occasionally arrested alleged perpetrators of civil war human rights abuses, often using immigration perjury charges as a vehicle for prosecution. One of them was Charles McArthur Emmanuel, also known as Chuckie Taylor, the son of Charles Taylor. Raised in Florida, Emmanuel became the commander of the infamously violent Anti-Terrorist Unit, commonly known in Liberia as the "Demon Forces." He is currently serving a 97-year sentence back in Florida for his role in human rights violations carried out by the ATU.

President Sirleaf was unable under the constitution to run for a third term but unlike other African leaders, she did not push to change the constitution to allow a third term. We don't yet know whether her successors can or will continue an upward trend. Most candidates for President have highlighted corruption, but as our witness from the National Democratic Institute can tell us, these candidates have platforms that are light on policy specifics. Consequently, today's hearing is intended to examine the prospects for democracy and governance in Liberia following the October elections.

The United States is a key provider of technical assistance to Liberia's National Election Commission, including an International Foundation for Electoral Systems program, funded by USAID, and the U.N. Development Program, backed by nearly \$12 million in mostly European Union funding under a multifaceted project from 2015 to 2018. The Election Commission also receives broader institutional capacity building support under a second \$4 million USAID-funded program, the Liberian Administrative and System Strengthening.

Our government has a significant investment in Liberia on several fronts. The future direction of this country is important to the United States. Therefore, we have a stake in the next Liberian government building on advances made in democracy and governance under the current government and must continue to provide assistance to that end and insist on no backsliding as we see in far too many countries in Africa today.

Most of all, there must be much more done to minimize the impact of corruption in Liberia, which not only robs the people of the benefits of their country's resources and labor, but also discourages foreign investment that could provide a needed boost to development.

October's election will tell a lot about where Liberia is going, and we need to keep a close watch on developments in this important African ally.