

# Development diplomacy

## INTERVIEW WITH AUGUSTINE NGAFUAN

MINISTER FOR FOREIGN AFFAIRS, REPUBLIC OF LIBERIA



AUGUSTINE NGAFUAN received a Bachelor's Degree in Liberia and an MBA from the University of Rochester in New York. He was a central banker first before entering the government of Ellen Johnson Sirleaf in 2006 as Border Director of the Republic of Liberia. In 2008 he assumed the position of Minister of Finance before becoming Minister of Foreign Affairs in 2012.

### What are the main roles and responsibilities of your ministry?

Our role is to ensure that as we focus on our domestic development while also being at peace with our neighbours. Liberia's challenges were not only self-made; we had regional and international dimensions. So we at the Foreign Ministry manage Liberia's relationships with the outside world to keep them as peaceful, as cordial, as productive and as mutually beneficial as it should be. Our strategic focus is what we call development diplomacy, meaning that we try to use our foreign relations to deal with the development challenges of Liberia. As a country that has been saddled with a lot of difficulties, we need now to create opportunities for our people, to bring jobs to our people and to deal with our infrastructure deficits. We as a country cannot do it without good relationships with the outside world – whether with international organisations or regional partners. We want an engagement that will help to advance Liberia's development. So strategically we want a situation where we buttress the economic development of our country, use our foreign policy machinery, our embassies and other means to bring partners that will come to Liberia and help our development.

### How do regional issues in neighbouring countries – such as conflicts, unrest, political and economic instability – affect Liberia?

There is no way that we can draw a dichotomy between what happens here with what happens regionally. If you look at the Liberian civil crisis, you will find that it had serious regional influences. At one point Liberia was being described as 'the problem child of the West African region'. This warranted a regional solution in the form of West African leadership through the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) Monitoring Group, a five nation peace-keeping effort that comprised Nigeria, Ghana, Sierra Leone, Gambia and Guinea. That was the first intervention in 1990, to help to quell the Liberian civil crisis. At that point it appeared to be a Liberian civil crisis but the rebellion actually came from one of our neighbouring countries. So, how we managed our relationship with them was immediately of utmost importance. But besides that, what was then deemed

as the Liberian civil crisis almost became a West African crisis. Eventually you had a Sierra Leone civil war. And the individuals that entered Sierra Leone came from Liberia. There was also the Côte d'Ivoire civil war, and then there was some attempts to destabilise Guinea. Fortunately it didn't reach a point of maturation, so we were lucky. But in trying to find solutions now, we should seek regional solutions. Now we are concerned about the Malian situation. Though Mali does not have a border with Liberia, we feel that any country in our region becoming a hotbed of crisis affects our peace because we too had a situation where more than 100,000 of our compatriots took up arms. We had to disarm them and give them opportunities; and we are still facing the challenges of unemployment. Wherever there is a crisis, that can entice mercenaries, and people of these kind of intentions can cross borders. So we are concerned – whether it's Mali, Guinea, or anywhere in the region. If the world gets safer, we are safer because our crisis proved that we cannot de-link ourselves from the international dimension. Economically, we were affected by the shocks during the global financial crisis and Liberia now faces its own problems as a result. We are trying to attract partners, and if these partners face problems economically we are affected. As a result of the 2009 financial crisis, the scheduled shipment of iron ore by an international company had to be deferred to 2011. It caused us some problems. They had to lay off temporarily. So if the global economy works well we are affected positively. If the global economy does not work well we are affected negatively. If the regional political and security situation is stable we are affected positively. And we with our history of conflict, we do not want anything that gives our people the nightmare of the past.

### The traditional relationship between Liberia and the US has a deep-rooted historical significance. Can you tell us a bit more about your relationship with Europe and how that has developed in recent years?

The founders of Liberia came from the US. But at our founding we also had relationships with European countries. Being Africa's oldest independent country led us to have significant relationships with the

UK, France, Germany and others throughout our history. The EU as we speak is the largest provider of border support to Liberia. We have something called the Liberia Reconstruction Trust Fund; a pool managed by the World Bank but which brings together a host of donors, and EU countries are among the biggest donors. Now we're using funds generated there for infrastructure, especially roads. If we've made any progress, it is thanks to the astute visionary leadership of the President, but also it is because our partners were faithful at the right hour. European countries, the UK included, have been with us on the ground floor as we tried to make the transition from conflict to peace, and now to recovery and development. Incidentally, we gained our independence in 1847 and the first government to recognise Liberia's independence was that of Great Britain, so our historical relationship dates as far back as that time. In fact the first visit of the first Liberian president, Joseph Jenkins Roberts was to the United Kingdom.

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**Liberia's image overseas has suffered during and after the civil war. What is your strategy to revamp Liberia's international reputation?**

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You're right; we cannot talk about the Liberia of more than a decade ago or so because evidently the stories were horrible. At one point we were deemed one of the ten worst places to do business. We were a country at war with ourselves. Some of the most horrible stories about man's inhumanity to man occurred here. Now we are changing the story. And that's why the Liberian people elected Ellen Johnson Sirleaf. She has helped in changing the Liberian story internationally, and that has created an impression that Liberia is back. Liberia has restored its diplomatic relationships with almost all our significant partners. Previously, Liberia couldn't even pay some of its dues, we lost our voting rights at the IMF, the ADB, the UN. Now we are there. In fact, Liberia now has the vice presidency of ECOWAS – for the first time ever. My predecessor as Finance Minister, Antoinette Monsio Sayeh, became Vice President of the IMF for Africa. And we have successful Liberians across the world, I cannot draw the list, but it is this rebranding that has started. The positives of the country are being sold by other foreign ministries through our ambassadors. That's one of the reasons why we went to the UK for the UK-Liberia Investment Forum. The Vice President led a delegation, we met investors to tell them about the new Liberia, and that the Liberia of civil war and the Liberia of conflict is no more. This is a new Liberia, a Liberia poised for development. We have our challenges though; we're not out of the woods totally, but we've fought against our hard history,

we've learnt lessons from our history, and are taking the right steps. I think that's one of the reasons why the international community has been kind to this country. The fact that our President could be chosen by the US Secretary General to co-Chair the High Level Panel along with the British Prime Minister and the Indonesian President, is an honour to Africa and to Liberia. It helps the Liberian image. We are very proud that the British Prime Minister visited our shores. We've had a very strong bilateral relationship with Britain. This is the Liberia of now – people are not coming to talk conflict, not to talk how to bring warring factions around the table, but instead talking about a course towards the 2015 development agenda.

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**What are your diplomatic priorities?**

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We want to maintain good relationships with our partners, in the context of the UN. That we have the endorsement of the peace-keeping effort here showed that the world was unanimous in its support for Liberia. We want to retain the unanimity of support of all our significant partners, whether it's the US, Britain, China or others. Secondly, given our difficult history, it is important to ensure that our region is stable, especially our Mano River Union region of which our President is the Chair. Last year we dealt with some problems, especially along our border with Côte d'Ivoire. There were stories that some individuals caused border raids into Côte d'Ivoire but we managed to resolve this diplomatically. Our relationship with Côte d'Ivoire is now excellent. We are working with the Ivorian government to ensure that the right steps are taken to bring peace to the country, to consolidate their democracy.

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**What challenges are you likely to face in the years ahead, and how do you intend to overcome them?**

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One of our challenges is to ensure that we continue to work with our partners – especially our immediate neighbours – to keep our region stable. Because no matter what we do on the domestic front, everything we do relies on an ambience of peace and security. So to maintain peace and security is our key challenge. We've attracted – as a result of the war – a significant number of peacekeepers, but they will have to leave soon. We need to ensure that we take steps to manage whatever security challenges has come from the departure of the peacekeepers. We must ensure that our foreign relations are managed in a way that reduces risks from the external front, so we can deal with our internal challenges. It is our responsibility to work with our partners to ensure a peace and security which creates an environment for economic development that is sustainable. E

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