

RELEASE IN FULL

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From: OpsNewsTicker
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Subject: Nobel Peace Prize honours African, Arab women (Reuters)

OSLO (Reuters) - Declaring women's rights vital for world peace, the Nobel Committee awarded its annual Peace Prize on Friday to three indomitable campaigners against war and oppression -- a Yemeni and two Liberians, including that country's president.

Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf, Africa's first freely elected female head of state, shared the \$1.5 million with compatriot Leymah Gbowee, who led a "sex strike" among her efforts against Liberia's civil war, and Arab activist Tawakul Karman, who hailed the award as a victory for democracy in Yemen.

"We cannot achieve democracy and lasting peace in the world unless women obtain the same opportunities as men to influence developments at all levels of society," Norwegian Nobel Committee chairman Thorbjørn Jagland told reporters.

Johnson-Sirleaf, 72 and once dubbed the "Iron Lady" by opponents, is running for a second term in an election on Tuesday where she faces criticism for not having done enough to heal the divisions of years of civil war. Jagland dismissed suggestions the award might seem to be meddling in the vote.

But the former Norwegian prime minister said that honouring Yemen's protesters, who unlike those in Egypt, Tunisia and Libya are still battling to get rid of their ruler, sent a signal from Oslo that President Ali Abdullah Saleh, long a U.S. ally, and other Arab autocrats should now step down.

It is a message that the era of Arab dictators was over, Karman told Reuters in Sanaa, declaring her prize a victory for Yemen and for all of the uprisings of the Arab Spring.

The trio of laureates follow only a dozen other women among 85 men, as well as a number of organisations, to have won the prize over its 110-year history.

The Committee said it hoped the three-way award "will help to bring an end to the suppression of women that still occurs in many countries, and to realise the great potential for democracy and peace that women can represent".

ARAB SPRING HONOURED

Recognising Karman, a 32-year-old journalist and mother who was detained for a time during the unrest, was seen as a gesture of the Norwegian Nobel Committee's wider approval for the Arab Spring protest

movements, which had been heavily tipped to win the prize for their young street campaigners.

"In the most trying circumstances, both before and during the Arab Spring, Tawakul Karman has played a leading part in the struggle for women's rights and for democracy and peace in Yemen," the Nobel citation read.

Egyptian activist Asmaa Mahfouz, who had been nominated, said: "Giving it to Yemen means giving it to the Arab Spring, and this is an honour to all of us and to all Arab states."

The committee said all three women were rewarded from the bequest left by Swedish dynamite inventor Alfred Nobel for "their non-violent struggle for the safety of women and for women's rights to full participation in peace-building work".

LIBERIAN CAMPAIGNS

It noted that Johnson-Sirleaf had led the way for women to lead African states and that Gbowee, 39, had mobilised women across ethnic and religious lines to bring an end to the war in Liberia and ensure their participation in elections.

Her brother, Alphonso Diamond Gbowee, told Reuters: "I am so excited that her relentlessness to ensure the development of women and children in our region has been recognised.

"She's very hard-working, helping with women and children all over the place, especially in Ghana, Liberia and Sierra Leone ... This will be a challenge for her to do more. I have no doubt she'll continue to impact those vulnerable lives."

Speaking by telephone from Monrovia, Johnson-Sirleaf's son James told Reuters: "I am over-excited. This is very big news and we have to celebrate."

Johnson-Sirleaf was Liberia's finance minister, then suffered jail and fled the country as it descended into one of Africa's bloodiest civil wars, serving as a World Bank economist before going home and winning the presidency in 2005.

Gbowee's Women For Peace movement is credited by some for bringing an end to the civil war in 2003. The movement started humbly in 2002 when Gbowee organised a group of women to sing and pray for an end to fighting in a fish market.

She is the subject of an award-winning documentary film "Pray the Devil Back to Hell".

"Whatever they achieved today has been done along with all Liberian women," Liberia's minister for gender and development Vabah Gayflor told Reuters.

"It is something that all Liberian women will be proud of ... Women all over Africa and the world will be proud."

The prize will be presented in Oslo on Dec. 10.