

Americans lend a hand to new Liberia

By Christina Holder, Special for USA TODAY

MONROVIA, Liberia — After 14 years of civil war, Liberia was known for its blighted buildings, bullet-sprayed roads and child soldiers who wear wigs to dress up for battle.



Since a peace accord was signed nearly six years ago, American investors such as Black Entertainment Television founder Robert Johnson have started trying to help change the ruinous image of this small nation that has historic ties to the United States.

Johnson, ranked the third-richest African-American by *Forbes* magazine behind Oprah Winfrey and Tiger Woods, recalls getting a letter from a viewer suggesting that he buy Liberia — as in the entire country.

Instead, he opened a four-star, \$8 million resort last month on the outskirts of the capital of [Monrovia](#),

saying he wanted to help awaken business.

"In order for Liberia to move forward, it has to bring in outside business and outside support from various international agencies and corporations," Johnson said in a phone interview. "They obviously must have somewhere to stay."

Indeed, thousands of [United Nations](#) peacekeepers and other international workers now live in this nation of 3.4 million people, says the assistant minister for tourism, Scholastica Doe. "This can at least set the ball rolling," Doe says about Johnson's Kendeja Resort & Villas.



BET founder Robert Johnson opened an \$8 million resort near Monrovia in an attempt to awake Liberia's business.

Even so, without a plan to target guests who can afford the luxury hotel, where a suite costs \$490 a night, the resort will become "another one of those white elephants that just stands there and no one goes near," Doe says.

Kendeja's general manager, Ronald Stiling, knows it will take time. "This is not like switching on the light and everybody is there," he says. "It's about offering people good stuff, and they'll come. There is spending power in this country."

It could be years before businesses thrive. Liberia has an 80% unemployment rate. Most of the country is without electricity and running water. The national police force is unarmed because of postwar disarmament.

Liberia was founded in 1822 by freed blacks from the USA. In succeeding years, a cycle of oppression and tribal rivalries eventually led to a coup in 1980. [Charles Taylor](#), a warlord and former president, instigated a series of civil wars in 1989. The wars claimed the lives of more than 200,000 Liberians and displaced up to a million into neighboring countries. A peace agreement ended fighting in August 2003.

Two years later, [Ellen Johnson Sirleaf](#) became Africa's first democratically elected female president. Taylor is on trial in The Hague, Netherlands, in connection with war crimes in neighboring Sierra Leone.

After hearing the president speak in 2006 about the need for private U.S. investments to aid her country's slow rebirth, billionaire Johnson, who is no relation to the president, pledged \$30 million through his Liberia Enterprise Development Fund. He says [Sirleaf](#) asked him to build the resort as a way to encourage investors to visit the country.

"I think what you're going to see are more workers coming into Liberia as these businesses come in to invest," Johnson says.

Other companies are trying to start up and provide much-needed jobs. Charleston, S.C.-based Global Building Solutions, which oversaw construction of Kendeja, is planning to build gated housing communities with paved roads, running water and electricity for Liberians returning home.

Trendy restaurants powered by generators have popped up around Monrovia in the past year.

Hawa-Ellen Knuckles quit her job as an accountant in Lawrenceville, Ga., and moved back to Liberia two years ago. In October, she opened a restaurant downtown called Evelyn's after training her staff of 30, which took four months because most of them had never worked in a restaurant. Knuckles says she is still in the red, like many businesses here, but is beginning to taste success.

Hanté Collins, a refugee in Ivory Coast for most of the war, manages the resort's boutique. She makes about \$230 a month. "Liberia is going to rise up," she says. "I really want to see Liberia improved like other countries."

Precious Andrews Greaves opened P.A's Ribhouse in February 2008, to cater to the legions of foreign workers now in Liberia.

"It's like night and day here," she says. "There is hope."

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