



## Bob Johnson Urges African Americans to Support Liberia

By: Nikole Hannah-Jones

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The BET founder says that American blacks should have a special bond with an African country created by freed American slaves.

When Delta became the first American airline in many years to fly into Liberia last month, billionaire Robert "Bob" Johnson had a prime seat on that plane. That's because the inaugural flight was part of Johnson's ongoing effort to spur investment in the formerly war-torn West African nation.

Since hearing Liberian President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf lay out the challenges facing her country during the Clinton Global Initiative in 2006, Johnson has been determined to re-ignite the historic relationship between African Americans and the nation founded by former American slaves.

Johnson has committed to investing \$30 million to help fund Liberian entrepreneurs and last year opened a luxury resort there. He has taken delegations of African Americans to Liberia and is encouraging African Americans to invest in the country the way that American Jews support Israel.

The first black American billionaire is a busy man, but he took a few minutes to answer questions from *The Root* about his Liberian push and why African Americans should invest in Liberia, even at a time when so many are struggling at home.

***The Root:*** How did you come to form a relationship with Liberia?

**Robert Johnson:** I formed a relationship with the country of Liberia as a result of my participation in President Clinton's Global Initiative. I was introduced to, and talked with, the president of Liberia. I was impressed with her vision for the future of Liberia, her commitment to a democratic Liberia, and was aware of the longtime relationship between us and Liberia historically.

***TR:*** What is your vision for this relationship?

**RJ:** What I'd like to see happen is to be of help to President Sirleaf and the people of Liberia in an effort to restore their country after 15 years of civil war to a very vibrant, functional, free democracy with a free-market economy that provides jobs and economic development; to make Liberia an economic success story in West Africa; and to create a strong middle class for the 3.4 million people living in Liberia.

***TR:*** Talk about your leadership in this area.

**RJ:** I have worked very hard to get Delta to fly direct flights, I have a four-star hotel right outside of Monrovia and I am getting involved in housing development.

***TR:*** What role specifically do you think African Americans should play?

**RJ:** African Americans should understand that we have a long, historical and cultural tie to Liberia. Liberia was founded by freed slaves from America. The first 10 presidents were former freed American slaves. Their flag is like ours. As African Americans, we should look at Liberia the way Jews look at Israel. This should be one of our primary causes, to make Liberia the gateway to West Africa economically.

African Americans should urge members of Congress to support [Liberia. I think we should support Liberia [financially]; African Americans are doing this already. There are a number of churches over there. Liberians need books; you don't have to send a check. It can be very simple things. You can support some of the organizations that are doing things in Liberia.

**TR:** Do you think this is the best investment for black Americans at a time when so many black Americans are suffering? The most recent census statistics show that nearly one in four black Americans lives in poverty.

**RJ:** I think we recognize that we have some tremendous problems at home. The whole idea of the wealth gap, the unemployment rate, is heavy for African Americans. We've got these problems, but like I said, if you are a businessperson and you want to invest in West Africa, Liberia is a good place to do it.

From an individual, personal standpoint, it may be tough to do things ... but to the extent that you can, whether it is a book drive or supporting the understanding of our historical relationship with Liberia, that is a plus.

**TR:** Does the fact that you are asking African Americans to adopt Liberia for our own philanthropy signal to you a rise in the stature of black Americans?

**RJ:** We never had an African-American president. That is a huge statement for the man and the nation. At the same time, we have a huge gap in wealth creation, jobs and economic opportunities. Those two things are in conflict. Those contradictions have to be addressed. We cannot be lulled into the false sense of security. We've got to be able to look at the world as it is and move things in a positive direction that will benefit the 40 million African Americans in this country, and not just the select few of us.

*Nikole Hannah-Jones is a journalist who writes and blogs frequently about race.*

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