

Liberia: Sen. Coleman Denies Soft Stance On Health Minister-Designate

By Henry Karmo

Monrovia — Senator Peter Coleman (Congress for Democratic Change-Grand Kru County) is on the defensive over supportive comments he made regarding President Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf's nominee to head the Ministry of Health.

Dr. Bernice Dahn, the Sirleaf Administration long time Deputy Minister of Health Services and Chief Medical Officer of Liberia, who was recently nominated by President Johnson- Sirleaf and others have been indicted by the General Auditing Commission for financial and operational irregularities in the stewardship of the Ministry in the 2006/2007 and 2007/2008 audits of the Ministry. The audits were part of the requirement for Liberia to meet the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) Completion Point, which led to the waiver of Liberia's external debt by bilateral and multilateral donors.

Another nominee, Mr. Tolbert Nyenswah the Head of the country's Incident Management System (IMS), the organization that coordinates Government Ebola Virus Disease efforts has been implicated by the GAC in financial and administrative malpractices at the Ministry of Health during the audit of the Ministry for the 2006/2007 and 2007/2008 fiscal years. Mr. Nyenswah served as Deputy Head of the National Malaria Control Program (NMCP) during the audit period. He was recently nominated by President Ellen Jonsom-Sirleaf as a Deputy Minister, Ministry of Health. The nominations come amid growing concerns about how Liberia intends to improve its dilapidated health system in the aftermath of the deadly Ebola outbreak.

Recently Nyenswah and three senior officials of the team that managed the Ebola funding including -Wede Elliott Brownell Deputy Minister for Administration, Ministry of Foreign Affairs; James Dorbor Jallah, Executive Director, Public Procurement and Concessions Commission and Andre Pope, Head State Owed Enterprises Reporting Unit, Ministry of Finance and Development Planning, took exception to the GAC report describing the report as unprofessional.

The audit saga prompted Senator Nyonblee Kargba Lawrence (Liberty Party, Grand Bassa) to request that the Senate put on hold confirmation of presidential appointees who are named in reports from the General Auditing Commission of Liberia and other anti-graft institutions until the Public Accounts Committee (PAC) conducts public hearings and report to that body.

The Senator in her communication said: "Knowing that Liberia has been labeled as one of the most corrupt countries in the world, and we have a huge challenge to foster transparency and accountability, it is very important that the senate continue to be very supportive in the fight of corruption by ensuring that all confirmation for people who are implicated in Audit Reports or Audit indictees are put on hold until the PAC conduct public hearing and make final recommendations for action", Senator Lawrence appealed to her colleagues.

But Senator Coleman, chairman of the Senate Committee on Health raised eyebrows during the confirmation of Dahn last week when he told the Minister designate to focus on her plans for the Health Ministry and not listen to everything in the media. Said Senator Coleman: "Madam Minister: I will encourage you to go ahead with all these good plans you have earmarked for the Ministry of Health and don't pay much attention to every newspaper story of anything you hear on the radio".

The comments drew a red flag from the CDC which took exception to the Senator's statement which contradicts the party's position that those with allegations of corruption over their heads should clear up their issues before they can be confirmed.

Nathaniel McGill, National Chairman of the CDC told FrontPageAfrica this week took issue with Senator Coleman: "We will want him to tell us why he should make such comments when the party has stressed the need for individuals who have credibility issues to be investigated. We are not indicting the health minister but the fact that she has questions and he has gone ahead to clear her without investigation, there is a problem."

Twenty four hours later, Coleman somersaulted. In a text message to FrontPageAfrica, the Senator denied making the statement and instead sought "the necessary correction on the article."

Senator Coleman: "Your article quoted some statements attributed to me. At no time during the hearing did I ever make any of these statement attributed to me. I appeal to you please make the necessary clarification. - Kindest regards, Senator Dr. Coleman" But audio recordings on discussions during the confirmation hearing of Dr. Dahn in the possession of FPA indicate that Senator Coleman said as follows:

"What Senator Tornorlah said is key. Reconciliation, we have been talking about reconciliation in this country for a long time; it is not taking root and for us in the health sector the fact that the way which we work together we work together as one family. Doctors, Nurses, Physician assistants we work as one family because at one point in time our trust tend to cross so the sector you are going to control if confirmed is a sector where I think reconciliation needs to start.

"I heard you making reference to the health workers association been illegal, madam minister designate the health workers association is not illegal as minister of health for this country for eight years, I dealt with this organization it is a Bonafide registered organization at one point in time myself thought it was illegal. I researched it and it is a registered Bona fide organization. But leave out the issue of legality or illegality the fact of the matter is that if you are to be the head of this big, very big and very large sector of this country you are to pull, keep your staff together, keep a quiet tune in that sector because if there is no quiet tune, you will not sleep at night madam minister designate because I know even if you think you are doing well as minister when you wake up in the morning you will see all sort of things in the newspaper and if you mind it, you will get frustrated and frustrated. But I think you set your goals you have the investment plan and I think we all are in line with this investment plan. We think that it is that document if it is followed by the letter that will give us the robust plan that we all are craving for."

"Please, the whole issue as was rightly said, we will all work together to solve some of the problems or all of the problems. This committee exercises oversight over your agency. So it is like every other time we will be there when you get problem you will call us if we get problem we will call you and let's hasten to say if you are confirmed. Madam Minister, I think this session was very interactive and like we said, or some of my colleagues said we admire your passion."

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