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**PRESS RELEASE**

**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**  
October 24, 2007

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**NDI HONORS LIBERIAN PRESIDENT ELLEN JOHNSON SIRLEAF  
AND THE 50/50 GROUP OF SIERRA LEONE**  
*Speaker Nancy Pelosi Delivers Keynote Address  
Premiere of Documentary on the 50/50 Group*

WASHINGTON, DC – The National Democratic Institute (NDI) celebrated trailblazing African women at a luncheon hosted here today by NDI Chairman Madeleine K. Albright. NDI presented the 17<sup>th</sup> W. Averell Harriman Democracy Award to Liberian President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf and the 3<sup>rd</sup> annual Madeleine K. Albright Grant to the 50/50 Group of Sierra Leone.

House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, the first woman to hold that office, delivered the keynote address. “America has been the greatest force for peace and freedom in history because we have sought to use our power wisely and generously,” she said. “Everywhere I travel, the call is clear: the world needs America to lead. We must reclaim our rightful place in the community of nations, with a sustainable foreign policy that reflects American values.”

Dr. Albright, the first woman U.S. secretary of state, emphasized a similar theme. “If we fail to speak up for democracy, we will cast aside the cornerstone upon which America’s national security is built... So make no mistake, democracy builders such as NDI are vital assets in our confrontation with extremism, for it is no accident that terrorists thrive where democracy struggles.”

In presenting the Harriman award to President Johnson Sirleaf, Africa’s first woman president, Dr. Albright said, “The award recognizes individuals and groups who embody what NDI is all about; people who build democracy through their words and actions every day, no matter what the barriers, no matter how much cynicism, bigotry, opposition, and danger they might endure.”

President Johnson Sirleaf was honored for setting her country on the road to political and economic recovery after years of conflict and destruction. A tireless campaigner for reconciliation, justice and democratic rule, she spent more than a year in jail for criticizing Liberia’s past military dictatorship and had her life threatened for speaking out against corruption and misrule.

“Democracy is sacred,” said President Johnson Sirleaf, hailing America’s policy of promoting democracy abroad. “I am here as living proof to tell you that if the U.S. were to lose its will and go quiet on issues of liberty and human rights, that would shake the foundations of democracy around world.”

The 50/50 Group, founded in 2000 to promote the participation of women in Sierra Leone’s post-war

politics, has been a catalyst for the dramatic increase in opportunities for women to run for office and play more active roles in politics. National in reach, the 50/50 Group has influenced every election since 2002, including the national vote last month, by strengthening and expanding a network of talented women candidates and political activists.

A documentary, “*Side by Side*,” that premiered at the luncheon, profiled the development of the group and the determined efforts of its founding members. Founder Nemata Eshun-Baiden and President Harriet Turay accepted the award on behalf of the group, which will use its \$25,000 grant to advocate for women in advance of next year’s local elections.

“For us, democracy is not just a matter of elections and parties and political discourse, important as those things are,” said Dr. Eshun-Baiden. “Democracy for us is part of our healing process. Democracy is part of our rebuilding process.” Said Turay: “We are the women of Sierra Leone, sharing our troubles and efforts, but also our hopes and dreams, working together, taking small steps into our future.”

The event also honored the memory of NDI staff member Andi Parhamovich with the establishment of the Andi Parhamovich Fellowship, designed to enhance the skills of young women engaged in democratic development. Ms. Parhamovich, 28, was killed in an attack Jan. 17 while working in Baghdad. In announcing the fellowship, Dr. Albright said it “reflects Andi’s dedication to the participation of women in politics, to democracy, and to reconciliation between people of different ideologies and faiths.” Established in cooperation with the Parhamovich family, the fellowship will annually bring to Washington, DC, a young woman – selected from NDI local staff or partner organizations in one of 60 countries – involved in building and consolidating democracy in her country.

NDI’s W. Averell Harriman Democracy Award pays tribute to Governor Harriman’s reverence for public life and respect for democratic debate and competition by honoring individuals who exemplify a commitment to democracy and human rights. Past recipients include former U.S. President Jimmy Carter, former Czech Republic President Václav Havel, former U.N. Secretary General Kofi Annan, former Philippines President Corazon Aquino, the signatories to the 1998 Northern Ireland Good Friday Agreement, and Senators Joseph Biden, Edward Kennedy, Richard Lugar and George Mitchell.

The Madeleine K. Albright Grant recognizes the contributions Dr. Albright has made in educating and improving the lives of women across the globe through support to organizations that create greater roles for women in political and civic life. It is part of NDI’s Win With Women Global Initiative, which promotes women’s political leadership worldwide. Political leaders from more than 100 countries have become part of the initiative. Past recipients include the Women’s Political Caucus of Indonesia and the Mostar Women’s Citizen Initiative of Bosnia-Herzegovina.

*For more than two decades, NDI has supported people around the world who are working to build more democratic societies. Responding to requests for assistance, NDI’s international network of experts and practitioners provide people with tools to strengthen political and civic organizations, safeguard elections, and promote citizen participation, openness and accountability in government.*

*For more information about NDI, visit the NDI website at [www.ndi.org](http://www.ndi.org).*