

Clinton "feels the pain" of Africa, and prepares new imperialist crimes

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A persistent theme of Clinton's 12-day tour of Africa has been contrition for past wrongs inflicted on the peoples of the region. While the thrust of the African trip has been to present an upbeat image of a thriving new continent ready to serve as the partner of US multinationals, Clinton has laced his speeches with apologies or near-apologies for the past sins of the United States.

There may well be an element of genuine emotion in the president's remarks. Confronted with the appalling conditions which capitalism has created in Africa at the close of the twentieth century, it is not inconceivable that even a US president could be shaken. Nevertheless, an examination of Clinton's remarks in the context of US policy toward the continent makes clear that their essential content is an intensification of the oppression which the banks and multinational corporations have historically inflicted on the African people.

In Uganda, Clinton declared: "It is well not to dwell too much on the past, but I think it is worth pointing out that the United States has not always done the right thing by Africa." He went on to cite Washington's support of dictatorships which lined up with the US against the Soviet Union in the Cold War, rather than considering "how they stood in the struggle for their own people's aspirations."

He visited the issue of a slavery, with remarks that managed both to trivialize the human suffering inflicted by chattel slavery in America and grotesquely distort history. "Before we were even a nation, European Americans received the fruits of the slave trade. And we were wrong in that," Clinton declared. He then boasted of the many black congressmen, administration officials and businessmen who were traveling in his delegation, as if this represented some sort of atonement for past sins.

In reality, slavery was not a boon to "European Americans" in general, but rather the basis of a socioeconomic system that benefited definite ruling classes, the plantation owners of the South and certain commercial interests in the American North and in Europe, at the expense of the slaves and the laboring masses all over the

world. Hundreds of thousands of "European Americans" gave their lives in a civil war to eradicate the slave system.

Why does Clinton—and he is certainly not alone in this—attempt to reduce the question to one of race? The major reason is that such an explanation obscures the class basis of oppression and tacitly justifies the existing system of wage slavery, which Clinton and his aides and allies, black and white alike, defend.

In Rwanda, Clinton delivered another apology, this time over the failure of the US to halt the mass slaughter which claimed a million lives in 1994. Clinton vowed, "We must have global vigilance. And never again must we be shy in the face of the evidence." He suggested that the US must be prepared to intervene militarily in the event of a similar outbreak of violence in the future.

The mea culpas from the US president suggest that both the atrocities in Africa and the sins of the United States are things of the past. Apologizing is somehow supposed to wipe the slate clean. The historical relationship of oppression and exploitation supposedly has been transformed into a "partnership of equals." However, the rhetorical breast-beating raises many more questions than it answers.

Even as Clinton spoke in Rwanda, civil strife continued between Hutus and Tutsis in that country. Because of security concerns, the Secret Service determined that Clinton could not leave the airport even to walk 150 yards to a genocide memorial of human bones erected shortly before his visit.

Across the border in the Congo, evidence of mass killings of Hutu refugees continues to mount against the US-backed regime of Laurent Kabila and the Rwandan army which helped place him in power. The entire African Great Lakes region remains a powder keg. To the north, the US continues to funnel aid to the armed group seeking the secession of southern Sudan. Over a million have died in this conflict over the last 15 years and it continues to produce fresh atrocities.

Throughout the continent US weapons that were poured

into Africa during the Cold War are still used in scores of civil conflicts. Moreover, the Pentagon has aggressively sought relations with Africa's armies, providing military hardware and training to forces which have historically been used to kill their own peoples.

In the selection of Clinton's itinerary and the African leaders with whom he conferred, the US is lining up with regimes and movements in Uganda, Rwanda, Sudan and the Congo which are engaged in internal civil wars and stand accused of atrocities. The Ugandan government of President Yoweri Museveni, the linchpin of Washington's new African policy, has repeatedly demonstrated its propensity for military actions outside its own borders. By forging such alliances, Washington is only creating the basis for a new round of bloody conflicts

There is, of course, a more fundamental question. What gives rise to Africa's civil wars and so-called tribal conflicts in the first place? In his remarks on Rwanda, Clinton suggested that it was a matter of moral failure, caused by those who fail to "embrace the common humanity we all share."

Similar explanations were advanced by the missionaries who sought to convert African "savages" a century ago. Then as now, such theories serve to justify the real savagery carried out by colonialism and imperialism against Africa.

The fratricidal violence which has gripped the Great Lakes Region, Liberia, the Sudan and other parts of Africa can only be comprehended in the context of the grinding poverty which afflicts the region, together with the breakdown of the national states erected through colonialism's transfer of power to an aspiring African bourgeoisie 40 years ago.

The policies which Clinton has advanced in the course of his African tour will not resolve these historic problems, but rather exacerbate them. The recurring theme sounded by the administration is one of "trade, not aid." Africa will supposedly develop through the application of free market policies and an open door to US investment and exports.

The fruits of the free market have already been evident for some time in Africa. It has taken the form of structural adjustment programs imposed according to the dictates of the International Monetary Fund. These austerity packages demand that Africa's economies and immense natural wealth be entirely subordinated to meeting payments on nearly a quarter trillion dollars in debts owed to Wall Street and other world banking centers.

Soaking up the great bulk of Africa's export earnings, debt repayment condemns millions to death from starvation and disease while leaving the continent's infrastructure in a state of collapse. If the White House was genuinely concerned about alleviating the suffering of the African masses, it could propose writing off these debts and diverting the vast

resources going to the banks into education, welfare and development programs. Such a policy is excluded because it infringes on the profit interests which Clinton is in Africa to promote.

Meanwhile, not only is aid being slashed—US aid to Africa has been cut by one quarter in recent years, while aid from all Western governments to the so-called Third World was slashed by 12.3 percent last year alone—but the World Bank is predicting that investment flows to these countries will decline as well this year.

The significance of the "partnership" which Clinton is proposing to Africa became clear on the South African leg of his tour where US trade demands have marred Washington's attempts at image-making. The US is insisting that South Africa's plans to import cheaper generic medicines for use in its public health system is a violation of intellectual property rights. Speaking for the powerful US pharmaceutical lobby, administration officials have made it clear that if Pretoria fails to knuckle under and buy the more expensive US name brands, it could be frozen out of the US-African trade agreement.

Clinton claims to stand ready to act to prevent new bloodletting in Africa, while the US pursues economic and political policies which can only intensify the tragic suffering of millions of Africans, and make new atrocities inevitable.

Behind Washington's supposed humanitarian concerns, US imperialism is making a case for its right and duty to intervene militarily on the continent, whenever and wherever it sees fit. Such interventions will be directed not at alleviating the conditions of the African masses, but at furthering US strategic interests in the region and defending the profits and property of American-based multinationals.



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