

Clinton's tour

A bid to make Africa profitable for US capital

Bill Vann**26 March 1998**

The Clinton administration has promoted its 12-day, six-nation tour of Africa as the launching of a “new economic partnership” and a demonstration of Washington’s support for “progressive” new leaders who are bringing about an “African renaissance.” Clinton’s domestic political critics have dismissed the trip as a flight from the relentless and humiliating attacks of the special prosecutor and the media over alleged sexual scandals, a subject which continues to dog him even as he makes his way around the African continent.

Behind the tour, however, lie definite economic and political interests. Essentially, it is part of an attempt to exert US hegemony over the African continent and to turn it into a new source of profits for US-based multinationals. This initiative is directed against the continuing influence of the old colonial powers of Europe, in particular France, and is being pursued at the expense Africa’s of impoverished masses.

The centerpiece of the shift in US policy has been the Africa Growth and Opportunity Act, recently passed by the US House of Representatives. Clinton declared that the legislation would inaugurate “a dynamic new Africa ... making dramatic strides toward democracy and prosperity.” Vernon Jordan, the president’s advisor and frequent envoy to Africa, declared recently before a trade conference in Ethiopia that as a result of Clinton’s plan, the world would witness the birth of “African economic lions,” comparable to the Asian “tigers.” Given the ongoing meltdown of the Asian tiger economies, Jordan’s rhetoric may have revealed more than he intended.

Washington promotes its initiative as a “partnership of equals,” declaring it a break with a previous policy of aid, now portrayed as paternalistic and inclined to breed dependence. This claim ignores the fact that the United States had already slashed its aid to Africa by more than 25 percent before the new trade act was proposed. The handful of new aid programs announced by Clinton in the course of his tour are strictly for show, representing a drop in the bucket compared to what has already been cut.

As for the conception that a deal struck between the US and the countries of sub-Saharan Africa would constitute an agreement between “equals,” the economic output of all of these countries combined represents a small fraction of US production.

The real aim of the pact is to break down all barriers to US investment and the export of US goods and services to the continent. This means the eradication of subsidies and all forms of protection for the limited domestic industries that exist, as well as for African farmers. The pact also demands the strict adherence of participating countries to “economic reform,” i.e., the type of harsh austerity prescribed by the structural adjustment programs of the International Monetary Fund.

The net effect of these policies will be the bankrupting of African

manufacturing and agriculture and the further impoverishment of the vast majority of Africa’s population, combined with substantial profits for the multinationals and the enrichment of a thin layer of the African ruling classes.

Africa’s “hearty appetites”

In advance of the Clinton trip, Susan Rice, the US assistant secretary of state for African affairs, said that the president was going because “Africans are taking their seats at the global economic table and arriving with hearty appetites for lucrative commercial dealings.”

No doubt a narrow stratum of such Africans exist. They are to be found in and around the corrupt regimes which are hosting Clinton. For the vast majority of the continent’s population, however, appetites of a far more meager character go unfulfilled and poverty, disease and starvation remain an ever-present reality.

Half of Africa’s population live on less than a dollar a day. These 350 million people don’t even enter into the economic calculations being made by the authors of US trade policy. There is ample evidence, Clinton’s rhetoric notwithstanding, that poverty on the continent is deepening rather than diminishing. According to the 1997 report of the United Nations Development Program, Africa is the only continent in the world which will become poorer in the twenty-first century than it was in the twentieth.

One out of every five African children dies before reaching the age of five, the vast majority because of easily preventable diseases and the lack of clean drinking water.

Half of Africa’s children do not attend even primary school, and it is the only region in the world where school enrollment rates are actually declining.

Meanwhile, African countries are crushed beneath a mountain of foreign debt. Sub-Saharan debts total about \$223 billion. Debt repayment claims fully 80 percent of these countries’ foreign exchange earnings, making significant investments in education, health care and other essential programs virtually impossible. Governments transfer four times as much money in debt service to developed nations as they spend on health and education.

While the US provided its formal backing for debt relief for the poorest countries, it has worked behind the scenes in the IMF, World Bank and Club of Paris to delay any debt reduction and to push through the strict austerity measures which have turned Africa into a net exporter of capital to the wealthiest nations.

According to some estimates, if the money now being paid by

Africa to the Western banks and financial institutions were directed to meeting essential needs, the lives of 21 million African children could be saved and primary education could be provided to 90 million children now unable to attend school. No such measures, however, are contemplated in Clinton's "partnership."

What does interest the US government and the multinationals are the extraordinary profits that can be made in Africa by taking advantage of its undeveloped and impoverished condition. Vast natural resources combined with some of the lowest wage rates in the world serve as a powerful magnet for capital. According to a recent Commerce Department report, investment in sub-Saharan Africa generated a return of 31 percent in 1996, compared to 13 percent in the Asian-Pacific region and 12 percent in Latin America.

Clinton's itinerary

Official spokesmen in Washington have indicated that the decisions on what countries would be included and which ones excluded from Clinton's tour were determined by such considerations as respect for human rights and progress toward democracy. An examination of the conditions existing in these countries, however, makes it clear that the real criteria were the embrace of IMF economic policies and support for US strategic goals on the African continent.

The pivotal figure in Clinton's African tour is Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni, described by US officials as a "model leader." Museveni, like several other of Washington's favorite African chiefs of state, is a former guerrilla and self-proclaimed Marxist, who has since embraced free market economics and US foreign policy.

He runs Uganda as a one-party state under the so-called Movement system, named for the National Resistance Movement, the armed group which placed him in power 12 years ago. His regime has banned political parties and restricted freedoms of the press and assembly, while forcing through IMF-dictated "reforms."

Similarly despotic regimes exist in the other African countries with which Washington has aligned itself, such as the Democratic Republic of Congo, Eritrea, Ethiopia and Rwanda. Questioned about how the US could brand certain African regimes as dictatorships while embracing governments employing nearly identical methods as "democracies," a US spokesman declared: "It's not that we have a double standard. It's that we have varying standards based on historical context."

The average per capita income in Uganda remains at about \$260. Museveni's regime spends approximately 20 percent of its annual \$1 billion budget on the Ugandan army, which has unsuccessfully attempted to crush insurgencies in the north and the west of the country, while it has engaged in continuous military adventures outside the Ugandan borders.

With substantial military aid from Washington, the Ugandan regime has practiced a new form of "Pan-Africanism," one which appears aimed at carving out a US sphere of influence on the continent. In 1994, the Ugandan military organized and led the insurgent forces which overran Rwanda in the wake of the genocidal ethnic violence in that country. Three years later, Museveni's regime once again played the key role in mobilizing the forces which overthrew the Mobutu regime in Congo, placing Laurent Kabila in the presidential palace.

Stoking up the war in Sudan

Now the Ugandan government, supported by Washington, is covertly backing the Sudanese People's Liberation Army (SPLA) of Col. John Garang, a movement which is attempting to separate the non-Muslim south of Sudan from the predominantly Muslim north. More than a million people have died in this 15-year-old ethno-religious war.

It is widely acknowledged that the SPLA has little chance of winning a military victory over the government in Khartoum. Nonetheless, the US is funneling aid to the group, including arms via Uganda, as part of its international campaign to isolate and destabilize Sudan, which it has branded a terrorist nation. Meanwhile, the Sudanese regime has retaliated by providing support to the insurgencies in Uganda.

On Wednesday, Clinton and Museveni cohosted a "Summit for Peace and Prosperity" in Entebbe, attended by the heads of state of Congo, Ethiopia, Kenya, Rwanda and Tanzania together with representatives of Eritrea and Zimbabwe. While the meeting was billed as a forum for resolving regional conflicts, the two countries facing the most fighting, Sudan and Burundi, were excluded from the talks. Also excluded were any representatives of Somalia, which also teeters on the brink of a new full-scale civil war. The selection of participants indicated that Washington was not so much interested in preventing conflict as in solidifying a pro-US coalition engaged in stoking up these clashes.

In pursuing its goal of strategic hegemony on the African continent, Washington has become the leading arms supplier to the region. The Pentagon is actively engaged in training and advising the military of regimes whose armies are guilty of gross violations of human rights. US military support has gone to 49 out of Africa's 53 countries in the 1990s, and Washington shipped about \$400 million in military hardware to the continent between 1991 and 1995 alone.

Far from promoting an "African renaissance," US policy is directed at recolonizing Africa under the banner of the "free market." Both its economic and political initiatives are creating the conditions for an explosive growth of poverty, civil war and social upheavals.



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