

# Clinton's Nigeria visit seeks to strengthen US influence in Africa

Trevor Johnson, Chris Talbot  
1 September 2000

Clinton's visit to Nigeria was part of attempts by the United States to strengthen its influence in Africa, after the debacles of recent years.

Behind the rhetoric that success in Nigeria could “lift the whole region towards prosperity and peace”—as national security adviser Sandy Berger put it—is the fear that America is losing out to other western powers in an area of great economic importance.

After the US military debacle in Somalia and the failure of the Nigerian-led ECOMOG forces to bring stability to Sierra Leone, the US government has recognised that it has been badly wrong-footed on its African policy. The most obvious sign of this was the ability of Britain to send its own force to Sierra Leone and effectively take over the leadership of the intervention in that country.

Moreover, when Clinton visited Africa in 1998, he spoke of an “Africa renaissance” led by the continent's “new leaders”. Since then the regimes he visited on his earlier tour, Uganda, Rwanda, Ethiopia and Eritrea, have been locked in wars and virtually every country has been plunged into deeper debt and poverty as a result of IMF structural adjustment programmes.

Now the US is seeking to aggressively assert its economic and military might on the continent.

The Clinton regime is concentrating on what it calls “conflict containment” in Africa. The aim is to do this through the main regional powers, Nigeria and South Africa, and this was the theme of Clinton's visit. In the last weeks the US announced that it was training a new Nigerian armed force, increasing the number of US trainers in Nigeria from 40 to 200. This week, the first of these American military personnel arrived to train and equip five Nigerian battalions that Clinton said would be ready to enter Sierra Leone at the beginning of next year.

Underlining the importance of Africa's oil and mineral wealth, a *Washington Post* article pointed out that “the United States imports as much oil from Africa as from the entire Persian Gulf, and US energy imports from Africa are expected to increase substantially over the next decade.” This was reflected on Clinton's visit by his being surrounded by hundreds of businessmen, particularly from the oil sector (Chevron, Exxon-Mobil and Texaco), keen to exploit Nigeria's resources.

Nigeria has plans to increase its oil production by 50 percent to around 3 million barrels per day. This is a welcome development for the US because—despite Nigeria being only its fifth largest source of oil—it is keen to exploit any possible avenue to persuade the OPEC countries to increase output and decrease prices.

Politically, however, Clinton's visit was hardly an unqualified success. He is basing US policy on a highly unstable and deeply unpopular regime. Having come to power 15 months ago, full of promises and amid widespread hopes of genuine improvements with the ending of military rule, President Obasanjo has quickly become discredited with the mass of the population.

He has dutifully sought to carry out the bidding of the IMF, but faces growing public disaffection due to mounting unemployment, poverty and fuel shortages. In the preparations for Clinton's visit, Obasanjo had the shanties of the poor bulldozed in Abuja and drove beggars off the streets. The number of Nigerians living below the poverty line approached 80 million in January this year, out of a population of 120 million. There has been a fall in life expectancy from 52 to 49 years, due mainly to the increase in AIDS. Factories are running at below 25 per cent of capacity, and the infrastructure is in a state of decay. Unemployment is being worsened by the privatisation of industries and the resulting job cuts.

On top of this, Nigeria is wracked by ethnic violence that threatens to escalate into civil war at any time.

Clinton has no answer to these explosive social problems. He said he came to “pledge American support for the most important democratic transition in Africa since the fall of apartheid,” but there was no serious gesture of US assistance to help alleviate Nigeria's desperate poverty. Apart from using its influence to secure a \$1bn credit facility with the IMF, the US has done nothing to help Nigeria tackle the huge \$30 billion debt built up under previous military rulers. Although US aid to Nigeria increased this year to \$108 million, this is an infinitesimal sum compared to Nigeria's debt interest payments. Obasanjo called repeatedly, in public as well as in private, for the US to aid his government by easing Nigeria's debt burden. He was bluntly told by Clinton to “be patient” and to prevent internal bickering in parliament from obstructing the implementation of IMF policies.

After Nigeria, Clinton visited Tanzania where an eight-hour stop was planned so that he could attend the expected dramatic conclusion of the two-year Burundi peace process led by former South African president Nelson Mandela. Burundi's civil war has continued since 1993 with the loss of several hundred thousand lives. As in neighboring Rwanda, Burundi is divided into ethnic Tutsis—who form about 15 percent of the population but dominate the government and army—and the Hutus, who make up almost 85 percent of the population. However negotiations between the various factions involved in the war have collapsed. The two main rebel Hutu groups were not even taking part in the negotiations, and both the Burundi government and other parties involved in the talks balked at the deal authored by Mandela at the last moment. Clinton was forced to fly back without this particular feather in his cap.



To contact the WSWs and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](http://wsws.org/contact)**