

Blair's neocolonialist vision for Africa

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In a four-day visit to West Africa, British Prime Minister Tony Blair set out his agenda for future imperialist intervention in the continent. He did so in his characteristic style, which increasingly resembles that of a colonial missionary. With moralizing zeal Blair took up the theme he raised several times last year that Africa is a “scar on the conscience of the world,” and suggested that with an African child dying every three seconds, “no responsible world leader can turn their back on Africa.”

In a flying visit to Nigeria, Ghana, Sierra Leone and Senegal, Blair pledged that he would take up the issue of Africa with the other G8 western powers. He did so in response to the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD), a plan drawn up by African leaders calling for billions of dollars in aid and investment to halt the economic decline of the continent.

Blair insisted that the West must be involved in Africa in order to put an end to “failed states” that he claims are the breeding ground for global terrorism. It was in the West's “self interest” to get involved: “there is no leafy suburb that is so far from the reach of bad things and bad people.”

Media pundits suggested that the African trip was merely a diversion from the problems of collapsing public services that the British prime minister faces at home. Such a resort to populist nationalism is useless for the purpose of a genuine examination of the real motives behind Blair's pious talk of bringing peace and economic growth to Africa.

Last month a visit to the Democratic Republic of the Congo as well as countries involved in the Congo war—Uganda, Rwanda and Burundi—was made jointly by the British and French foreign ministers, an unprecedented departure for the former colonial rivals. This collaboration was underlined when Blair visited the French ex-colony of Senegal.

Blair made frequent references in his speeches to the resources of Africa—in particular to the vast war-torn regions of the Congo and Sudan. He referred to a possible British appointment of a peace facilitator in Sudan.

A clear inference can be made from this newfound political focus—that with the US concentrating on central Asia and the Middle East, the European powers should move to exploit the resources of Africa. All of Blair's recent extensive world travels have so far been made as an unctuous supporter of the Bush administration, but at the same time he is looking for ways to further British national interests as the US stakes its claim to world resources.

Tear-jerking hypocrisy is hardly a new phenomenon in British politicians speaking on the sufferings of the African people. Yet Blair's ignorance of history coupled with his religious prejudice

and seeming ability to believe his own rationalizations, must make him a favourite mouthpiece for the Foreign Office speechwriters.

Firstly he called for a dramatic escalation in military interventions in Africa, naturally in the name of enforcing peace. He urged the formation of disciplined forces made up of African soldiers trained by British or Western military experts, and based on the example set by Britain in Sierra Leone. But if British troops have temporarily pacified the Revolutionary United Front rebel forces in Sierra Leone, it is only by exporting the conflict to Liberia and Guinea. The supposed peacekeeping mission in Sierra Leone, with the largest United Nations force in the world, is in effect part of an agenda for war, not just against the RUF, but also against the Liberian regime of Charles Taylor that backed them.

Many of the 9,000 troops of Sierra Leone's army, trained by Britain, now police the border with Liberia. All the evidence points to covert Western support for the Guinean government, a military regime with a long record of human rights violations, in the war against Taylor.

An examination of what has taken place in Sierra Leone shows the motivation for the British military mission. The top positions in the Sierra Leone army are British; the chief of police is British and so are leading civil servants. This is a thinly disguised recolonisation operation.

For the time being there is popular support for the British because they drove out the brutal RUF. But beyond a few operations carried out by NGOs, nothing will be done to alleviate the poverty and unemployment that gave rise to the RUF in the first place. Western aid will be used to attract transnational corporations and mining companies—their exclusion by the RUF and Charles Taylor being the real problem for the British government.

In its recent report on Sierra Leone, the International Crisis Group think-tank complains of a lack of transparency in the British-run government. It refers to “recent closed-door decisions to grant large and long-term diamond and oil concessions to foreign companies” and “at least four members of the government are reportedly engaged in illicit diamond mining”.

There are clearly plans for more British neo-colonial military involvement than in tiny Sierra Leone. Speaking to the Nigerian parliament, Blair explained that the British Military Advisory and Training Teams were working hard “in Ghana, southern and eastern Africa and now with a military adviser in Nigeria to provide assistance and advice for those who want it.” This was to “work with African countries and regional organisations to build up peacekeeping capacity of African forces.”

Some indication of the pressure Britain was applying behind the

scenes on the Nigerian government to act as an “African peacekeeper” came in a press conference held jointly by Blair and Nigerian President Obasanjo. Questioned about Zimbabwe, where Britain is asking for help to defend British business interests and white “kith and kin” against the regime of President Robert Mugabe, Obasanjo responded with exasperation: “If you want to wage a war on him [Mugabe], we do not have the capacity in Nigeria.”

Only days before Blair’s visit, the anti-democratic character of the Nigerian military on which Blair wants to base a pro-Western force was on display. Over 100 people were killed in ethnic clashes in Lagos. This followed a police strike, which made army intervention inevitable. At the end of January over a thousand died in the explosion of an ammunition dump at the Lagos barracks. And in December the Justice Minister Bola Ige was assassinated.

The governor of Lagos, Bola Tinubu, said “we know from intelligence reports” that retired military officers were responsible for these incidents: “They thought they would push the nation into catastrophe. They sponsored the police strike to create mayhem and unrest. Suddenly they sponsor the ethnic unrest since the police were on strike. They have the assets and they have the money to pay these unemployed youths to create trouble.”

The generals who ruled in Nigeria in the 1970s and 1980s and looted billions from the oil wealth of the country did so with British support and now have their money salted away in UK banks.

Even the sale of arms to various oppressive regimes in Africa, a long-standing bloody tradition in Britain, has increased under the Blair government. Campaigners have pointed to a quadrupling of arms sales to Africa since 1999, with countries such as Morocco, Egypt, Kenya, Gambia and even Zimbabwe included on the list of buyers.

If Blair’s proposals for African peace are a blatant fraud, so too are other parts of his agenda.

The promise to help Africa with economic growth is nothing but a thinly disguised cover for more corporate exploitation of the continent’s resources. Visiting an impoverished village in Ghana, Blair railed against unfair trading restrictions imposed by the West. Ghana can only export raw cocoa to Europe, and commodity prices continue to tumble. They cannot sell cocoa as chocolate because of high tariff barriers. As a result, Ghana, though once one of the richer countries in Africa, continues to sink into poverty.

Clare Short, the British Minister for international development who was accompanying Blair, blurted out, “It’s a conspiracy from France and the EU to lock Africa into poverty, and at the same time Europe preaches free trade.”

Whatever the rhetoric, neither Blair nor Short are leading a campaign against protectionism on behalf of the poor African farmers. Blair is supporting the NEPAD initiative as a convenient lever to use on behalf of the major corporations in a trade war designed to open up markets, whether in European agriculture and textiles or in services and utilities in Africa. Blair cited the chairman of Unilever complaining that every cow in the EU is subsidised to the tune of \$2 a day, the same amount that 450 million people in sub-Saharan Africa subsist on. It need not be said that Unilever is not exactly advocating the transfer of the EU

agricultural subsidies to pay for healthcare and education in Africa! It merely wants to boost the profits of its African subsidiaries.

Blair also pointed to the area that currently interests the City of London in Africa, when he called for investment in services and explained that Britain had launched a \$200 million Emerging Africa Infrastructure Fund. The intention is to use the latest World Trade Organization round to pressure undeveloped countries to sell off their utilities to the transnationals.

If any proof were needed of the British Labour government’s economic agenda in Africa, it is only necessary to look at their record on debt relief, an issue that Blair and Chancellor Gordon Brown have championed at previous G8 meetings. By offering minimal reductions in debt repayments to the Western banks, the International Monetary Fund’s Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) initiative has been used as way to force “reforms” on the poorest African countries, privatising the state sector including healthcare and education, and insisting on Western control of the country’s economy under the guise of “transparency”. Although Nigeria has not qualified for HIPC, Blair suggested Britain could consider debt relief provided “a clear track record of economic reform is established.”

The result of the debt relief campaign is that a staggering \$250 million a day is still being transferred from sub-Saharan Africa to Western banks, according to World Bank figures. Jubilee Research and the Drop the Debt Campaign have calculated that of the \$300 billion in debt owed by the world’s 52 poorest countries, only \$18 billion has so far been cancelled. For the first 22 countries to qualify for HIPC, annual debt repayments will be reduced by about one quarter, meaning that even after debt relief, all these countries spend more on debt repayments than they do on healthcare.

Whilst Blair concentrated on the issue of trade in his African tour, rather than on aid from the West, he did boast that Britain had doubled its contribution in aid to Africa since 1997. As with debt relief, however, aid payments have also been used to further a “reform” agenda—“hand-ups not hand-outs” as Blair put it. The current total of Western aid to the poorest countries, mainly in Africa, stands at a mere \$15 billion a year, having declined through the 1990s. Jubilee research calculate that only if the aid total was trebled and all debt to the Western banks cancelled would it be possible to attain the very modest United Nations Millennium Development goal of halving poverty by 2015.



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