

Bush's tour and US imperialism's designs on Africa

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15 July 2003

US President Bush's African tour was something of a public relations debacle. Though he went from one carefully staged media event to the next and was kept well away from both protesters and the mass of the population, he spent most of his time answering embarrassing questions about the failure to find Iraqi weapons of mass destruction and the false claims used to justify war.

His attempt to project a compassionate image was, to put mildly, less than convincing.

The visit started with Bush reading a speech on the slave trading island of Goree, Senegal. His speechwriters invoked every fighter against black oppression they could think of, but the effect was undercut by the fact that the local population had been rounded up and kept in a football stadium on the other side of the island for the duration of Bush's visit.

Among the heroes of liberation listed in Bush speech was Nelson Mandela, but Bush refused to meet the man himself because Mandela had attacked him over the Iraq war, denouncing the US president as a man who "cannot think properly."

The South African government arranged for Mandela to be in London during Bush's visit, in a diplomatic manoeuvre aimed at avoiding embarrassment. While he was in London, however, Mandela continued to attack US foreign policy. Giving the Red Cross Humanity Lecture, he said, "We have found ourselves compelled to speak out strongly against the rise of unilateralism in world affairs."

Meanwhile, Bush was promoting his \$15 billion AIDS initiative. In perhaps the most distasteful moment in a cynical and somewhat farcical tour, Bush was photographed hugging AIDS orphans while his wife shed tears.

America, Bush complained, was being presented as "a non-caring country." The words "America" and "war" were constantly being linked, he protested. (This from a man who declared after 9/11 that an open-ended "war on terrorism" would be the central focus of his administration, proclaimed a doctrine of pre-emptive war and proceeded to launch invasions against two virtually defenceless

countries—Afghanistan and Iraq.)

If Bush hoped his visit would dispel the image of the US as a warmongering bully, he was mistaken. The fraudulent character of his \$15 billion AIDS initiative was revealed even as he posed for photographs. Congress, controlled by his Republican Party, cut back funding for the initiative from \$3 billion to \$2 billion a year. But even if \$3 billion a year over five years were spent on AIDS, this sum would fall far short of the amount needed to tackle the catastrophe.

Bush's AIDS initiative is really about strengthening the US position in Africa at the expense of imperialist rivals such as France and boosting the position of American-based corporations. The head of Bush's AIDS initiative is to be former Eli Lilly executive Randall Tobias, a man with no experience in the field of public health or humanitarian operations. His appointment indicates that the pharmaceutical giants will be the ones to benefit the most from Bush's initiative, rather than AIDS sufferers in Africa. It is a clear signal that more affordable generic anti-AIDS drugs will not be financed. Instead, US pharmaceutical companies will be subsidised and their patents enforced in Africa.

Bush's staged photo opportunities could not hide his neo-colonial strategy for the African continent. The much-hyped AIDS proposals are part of a bid to shoehorn US corporations into Africa, oust foreign competitors and stamp out domestic enterprises.

US aid will increasingly be implemented by US-based organisations, rather than through long-established NGOs (non-governmental organisations), campaign groups and charities. United Nations bodies will be ignored.

Rather than backing the UN Global Fund to Fight AIDS, TB and Malaria, the Bush administration is attempting to set up its own alternative organisation that will be entirely subordinate to US interests.

This aim was highlighted by a recent conference organised by the American Enterprise Institute, a right-wing think tank close to the Bush administration. Entitled "NGOs: the Growing Power of an Un-Elected Few," the conference

denounced the policies of NGOs as hostile to US interests and free-market principles.

The US trade initiative, the Africa Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA), which was touted by Bush throughout his visit, is part of the same unilateralist corporate agenda. Even the most compliant African leaders complained bitterly about US protectionism, which is calculated to subsidise American producers by as much as \$200 billion a year. World Bank figures show that over the last two decades of the 20th century, African exports fell by nearly 60 percent. This is equal to five times the annual \$13 billion aid flow into Africa.

AGOA deals are already conditional on African countries opening up their markets to US investors and exports and supporting free-market principles. But the US now wants to impose even more conditions through a new round of bilateral trade deals.

How serious the impact of these deals will be can be seen from a recent comment in the South African newspaper *Business Day*, whose editorial line is favourable to so-called “free market” policies. Under the headline “Free-Trade Pact is Full of Dangers,” the newspaper warns the South African government against signing up to the new agreements because they entail opening up government procurement to US firms, stronger patent protection for American companies, including over-the-counter drugs, making the public sector privatisation programme more accessible to US investors, and allowing American firms to sue the government directly.

If South Africa, by far the strongest economy in Africa, is threatened by US trade measures, it is not difficult to understand the kind of economic pressure being applied to weaker countries in the rest of the continent.

The US drive into Africa is not only economic. It also involves establishing a much greater military presence under the guise of the war on terror. This will give the US control over key resources such as oil and provide it with a more rapid global reach.

Bush stressed the importance of the US working through local proxies, especially Nigeria, where the US has trained five battalions of troops. He also referred to a \$100 million commitment to strengthen the security arrangements in East African countries.

Nigeria is of vital strategic interest to Washington. African oil, mainly Nigerian, grew to 17 percent of America’s total imports and is expected to rise to 25 percent. Bush heaped praise on President Obasanjo of Nigeria, especially for his “commitment to regional peace.” US-trained Nigerian troops are expected to play a major role in policing the oil-rich West African region.

Nigeria is also likely to provide the bulk of the forces for a

US-backed intervention in Liberia. Secretary of State Colin Powell discussed the question while he was in Botswana. He suggested that a West Africa force would have to be “supported in some way by the United States ... whether that is just with logistics units or command-and-control units or communications facilities or support of that kind, or whether there would actually be US troops on the ground.”

In order to maintain US control over Nigeria, Bush is prepared to tolerate even the most blatant infringement of democratic rights. Bush ignored a petition from opposition politicians over the Nigerian presidential election that pointed out: “The degree of violence, rigging and other forms of electoral malpractice ... has been well documented and [is] currently the subject of litigation in the Federal Court of Appeal.”

The US administration remains divided over the question of sending its own troops to Liberia, but there is no dispute about the overall strategy of expanding America’s military role in Africa. In a *New York Times* report of July 5 it was reported that the US is seeking to expand its presence in Africa “through new basing agreements and training exercises.” Long-standing military ties with “allies” like Morocco and Tunisia are to be enhanced, access to long-term bases in countries like Algeria and Mali will be sought, and aircraft refuelling agreements such as those with Senegal and Uganda will be built upon.

The US European Command will rotate troops into “bare-bones” camps or airfields in Africa, marines may spend more time sailing off the African coast, and 1,800 American troops will continue to be stationed in Djibouti for “anti-terrorism” operations in the Horn of Africa. General James L. Jones, head of the European Command, has explained that he envisages a flexible “family of bases” in Africa from which operations ranging from small Special Forces interventions to brigade-size operations can be mounted.



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