

Blair visits Africa

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On the eve of the publication of the International Survey Group's report on weapons of mass destruction, which confirmed that he had lied about the existence of a military threat in Iraq, Britain's Prime Minister Tony Blair showed that his global ambitions have not been shaken by the proof that the targeting of Iraq was an unprovoked war of aggression.

On a lightning visit to Sudan and Ethiopia last week, Blair announced his intention to make 1,500 British troops available for deployment in Africa and to train 20,000 Africa soldiers.

With a disregard for the truth no less blatant than in the case of Iraq, Blair justified his military plan on the grounds that, "we know that poverty and instability leads to weak states which can become havens for terrorists and other criminals."

In the face of an AIDS epidemic, growing poverty, a lack of clean water, recurrent famine, the spread of malaria, polio and other preventable diseases, Blair's response is to mobilise the troops for a "war against terrorism."

Blair announced his proposals with an air of such sanctimonious piety it is difficult to believe that the assembled press corps could listen to it without suffering violent nausea. But their equanimity was maintained by gourmet meals and champagne. Eyebrows were raised when Blair's plane made a special 1,450-mile trip to pick up the food from Kenya while the prime minister was in Addis Ababa. When Downing Street smugly pointed out that the food was intended for the press and that the prime minister had eaten before he left, no one raised the incongruity of the whole diplomatic jamboree in the poorest continent in the world.

Blair is milking the aid business for all the favourable press coverage he can get. Since he made his "scar on the conscience of the world" speech in 2001, Blair has cast his relationship to Africa as a personal moral crusade. Africa is, he said in Addis Ababa, "the one noble cause worth fighting for." After making the obligatory trip to an AIDS orphanage Blair told the commission that the

"common bond of humanity" created a moral imperative to help Africa.

Styling himself a Christian socialist, Blair is accustomed to presenting himself more like a priest than a politician. The cynical calculation involved in this was picked up on by Dr Ian Taylor, lecturer in African politics at the University of St Andrews in Scotland. Taylor commented, "Africa is ripe for gesture politics because of its low-cost financially and low-cost politically. It makes good headlines, shows you care and plugs into New Labour imagery. But if nothing is achieved, then no one expected much and they can blame others."

In publicity terms this is a correct assessment, but something else is involved too. Blair is not only interested in boosting his poll ratings. His announcement on troops at a time when the UK is already heavily committed in Iraq shows that Blair is serious about extending British control over a continent it once dominated as a colonial power.

Britain is not alone in this ambition. Other former colonial powers are staking out their claims in Africa, which has become a valuable source of oil and mineral resources. The British troops will be part of the European Union's rapid deployment force. Blair said, "I want Africa to be the top priority for the EU's new rapidly deployable battle groups and to get them operational as soon as possible in 2005."

Blair's willingness to cooperate with other European powers is forced upon him by circumstances and in no way minimises the bitter conflicts below the surface of friendly diplomatic relations. The European powers negotiated the break up of Africa among themselves in the late nineteenth century and neither then nor now are the interests or views of the mass of the African population being consulted.

The effect of British military intervention in Africa is all too plain from the experience of Sierra Leone. A recent report from the Sierra Leone Truth and Reconciliation Commission set up after British troops intervened in the civil war two years ago warned, "Many of the dire

conditions that gave rise to the conflict in 1991 remain in 2004.”

Sierra Leone is rich in diamonds, bauxite and titanium, but the population is living in shacks that are washed away every time it rains. “As in the late 1980s,” says the report, “many young adults continue to occupy urban ghettos where they languish in a twilight zone of unemployment and despair.”

The government established by the British and United Nations intervention is criticised in the report for its corruption. Another UN report has also criticised the government over “chronic and rampant human rights issues.”

Even official bodies have to recognise that the fruits of British intervention in Sierra Leone are disastrous. Yet Blair can still propose that British troops should intervene in Darfur where the crying need is for latrines to be dug, wells to be sunk and children vaccinated, not the SAS to mount search and destroy operations or the RAF to bomb nomads.

Blair was in Africa to address the second meeting of the Africa Commission. It first met in London earlier this year at Blair’s instigation. He has co-opted a number of African leaders onto it including Prime Minister of Ethiopia Meles Zenawi, President of Tanzania Benjamin Mkapa and South African Finance Minister Trevor Manuel. It will publish its report when Britain is chairing the European Union and the G8 in May 2005, just before the expected date of the next British general election.

Alongside these political figures are charity organisers such as Sir Bob Geldof, who set up LiveAid at the time of the Ethiopian famine. His presence gives the impression that the purpose of the Africa Commission is to promote African economic and social development. But it is only the latest in a series of such commissions and initiatives since the Brandt Committee in 1982 that have met and produced their reports, while Africa has continued to get poorer.

Michel Camdessus, former head of the International Monetary Fund—the body which can claim credit for a large part of downward economic spiral that Africa became locked into during the 1980s—is one its members. Aid agencies such as Oxfam lobbied the Africa Commission over commodity prices, appealing for fairer terms of trade and debt relief, but what is likely to come out of is a further deterioration in the social and economic condition of the majority of Africans.

Peter Hardstaff of the World Development Movement described the Africa Commission as “a diversionary tactic

designed to draw attention away from 30 years of broken promises on Africa.” There is certainly that aspect to it, but in addition the Commission should be seen as part of the political preparation for much greater colonial control over Africa.

British Chancellor of the Exchequer Gordon Brown is floating a scheme for debt relief that is being touted as a “Global New Deal”, under which he claims \$100 billion a year would be made available for development funding in the poorest countries, most of which are in Africa. His plan is to launch government backed bonds on the world market. He is pressing the EU to contribute one billion euros to this International Finance Facility and to shift their aid budget from the Balkans to Africa. It will mean, he claims, that, “the world can look forward to a future free from the shackles of debt.”

The reality is more like the adverts that claim you can be free from worries about mortgage arrears and credit cards if you only consolidate your debt by taking out another loan at ruinous interest rates. Brown is offering to get poor African countries even further into debt. The money to finance this scheme would come out of the British and European aid budget, so that government money that was supposedly being given to help the poor of Africa would go straight to global financiers.

Indebtedness has been one of the main means by which Britain has drawn countries under its colonial control since Sir Evelyn Baring took over Egypt in 1883 on behalf of the country’s creditors. Masquerading under a guise of philanthropy, the Blair government is launching a similar bid for empire.



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