

Blair and Bush on Africa: pretense of aid masks predatory aims

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British Prime Minister Tony Blair's visit to Washington earlier this week was portrayed in the media as an effort on his part to persuade President George Bush to endorse plans for African debt relief. That this was so is a measure of the importance placed by Britain's ruling elite on helping the prime minister cynically exploit the fate of Africa in an effort to renew his favoured pose as the liberal conscience of the world.

Blair was meeting with the joint architect of the illegal war against Iraq just one month after Labour suffered massive losses in the general election, largely the result of continuing anti-war sentiment. So anything that distracts attention from Iraq is politically welcome. The same holds true for Bush. An opinion poll released this week finds that, for the first time, a majority of Americans believe that the war against Iraq was a mistake that has failed to make the US more secure.

Only days before the visit, Amnesty International accused the US and Britain of perpetrating and condoning acts of torture at detention facilities in Iraq, Cuba, Afghanistan and elsewhere. Just as significantly, at the height of Britain's general election campaign, leaked minutes of a July 23, 2002 meeting attended by Blair, Foreign Secretary Jack Straw, Defence Secretary Geoff Hoon, Attorney General Lord Goldsmith, and senior military and intelligence personnel, confirmed that Britain had seized on Iraq's supposed weapons of mass destruction to justify support for an unprovoked attack on Iraq. The minutes cited Sir Richard Dearlove, chief of the intelligence service MI6, stating that in Washington, "intelligence and facts were being fixed around" this policy of war.

Given the widespread anti-colonialist sentiment in Britain and the loss of trust in Blair and his government, his posturing as a friend of Africa is nauseating. In reality, he is once again utilising a mask of humanitarian concern to justify policies that will facilitate Britain's imperialist

designs.

The proposals outlined by Blair and Chancellor Gordon Brown offer very little in the form of debt reduction and make even this conditional on the adoption of policies favouring Africa's penetration by the transnational corporations—particularly in vital areas such as oil and minerals.

The poorest countries in the world owe money to individual countries, the private sector and to institutions such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. Debts to multilateral institutions account for approximately one-quarter of total debt—\$10-11 billion a year out of \$39 billion.

Blair is only asking for debt forgiveness by the "multilateral institutions"—the IMF, World Bank and African Development Bank—for around 23 countries whose regimes are considered sufficiently pro-western and pro-market oriented. Whatever debt is forgiven will be reimbursed in some form so that the solvency of the institutions is not threatened. Commentators have predicted that the total benefit to poor countries could be as low as \$500 million a year, which is equivalent to five days debt repayments.

More grandiose talk of doubling African aid from wealthy countries to \$50 billion under the existing Heavily Indebted Poor Countries Initiative (HIPC)—over the next three years—is to be paid for through a scheme devised by Brown, known as the International Finance Facility. This would fund debt relief by issuing bonds on the international markets, backed by government aid promises. In effect, it is a mortgage on future aid payments with guaranteed returns for investors and produces no real new money. A proposed moratorium on debt repayment is only to operate until 2015. After that, the countries concerned will still have to pay off 60 to 70 percent of what will then be a much larger debt.

In return, debtor countries have to agree to demands that

all major economic and social projects be “built and delivered in conjunction with the private sector.” They must also accept the introduction of means testing in place of universal welfare provision.

Washington would find nothing objectionable in the underlying aims of Blair’s proposals. But Bush is hostile to any talk of having to stump up more money and particularly to calls for the US and other major powers to finally honour their decades-old commitment to raise aid payments to 0.7 percent of national income. The US pays the lowest percentage of aid in the world at less than 0.2 percent, but this sum still makes it the most important single donor thanks to the size of the US economy.

Combined with American military might, this enables Washington to dictate to the African states without endorsing Britain’s proposed scheme. (Should anyone believe that this means that Blair can still speak from the moral high ground, British aid represents just 0.35 percent of gross domestic product—half the United Nations target. The government has only pledged to increase this to 0.4 percent by 2006.)

The Bush administration is also hostile to multilateral initiatives that do not allow it to directly control who gets aid and what conditions are attached. Washington’s own aid programmes are designed in part to please the Christian right—opposing such measures as birth control initiatives and contraception to combat AIDS in favour of advocating “abstinence.”

For these reasons, Blair received short shrift from Bush on his Africa proposals despite his best efforts to present a policy that would win favour with any Republican hardliner. At their joint press conference Blair stressed that he was not proposing “a something-for-nothing deal” and that he was setting out to create a “partnership with the African leadership that’s prepared to embrace the same values as Britain and the US.”

Bush’s only concession to Blair was to promise an undefined programme of debt relief for the world’s poorest countries and \$674 million in emergency aid for famine-stricken Ethiopia and Eritrea. This money was only brought forward from existing commitments and was described by Christian Aid as “a drop in the ocean.”

Even if all these schemes were honoured, the poorest countries in the world would still be left in a position where they are paying tens of billions of dollars every year to the richest. And to put this latest charitable initiative into perspective, it should be remembered that the US and Britain have already spent \$200 billion funding their war and occupation of Iraq.

Even so, a sycophantic media have done their utmost to whip up sympathy for Tony Blair’s noble efforts to secure African aid as quid pro quo for British loyalty in the Gulf. In truth, Blair and Bush are acting out the political equivalent of a good cop, bad cop routine. When it comes to fundamentals they remain joined at the hip.

The one occasion when reality intruded on the carefully crafted public relations initiative was when a reporter raised the question of the July 2002 Downing Street memo.

When asked whether the allegation that intelligence had been “fixed around the policy of removing Saddam through military action” was “accurate,” Blair and Bush presented a joint denial. Blair evaded the fact that Iraq had no weapons of mass destruction by insisting that war was made necessary by Hussein’s refusal to comply with UN demands that he get rid of them. Bush gave a typically garbled response focusing on the motives of whoever had leaked the memo in the middle of Blair’s election campaign.

A less compliant media would have treated the efforts of these two war criminals to recast themselves as global benefactors with equal contempt. As it is, Blair was given a somewhat easier ride than his master in Washington. But no one should be fooled by the crocodile tears now being shed over Africa, whether by Blair or any other establishment politician.

Military conquest and colonial-style occupation is only the most overt form of imperialist domination. Fundamentally, the subordination of the oppressed nations to the major powers is rooted in economic relations. The proposed aid efforts pose no challenge to the super-exploitation of the world’s oppressed peoples; they reinforce it.

After Afghanistan and Iraq, it is time to draw some lessons. The stated aim of the meeting between Bush and Blair was to prepare a common approach for the G8 summit in Scotland next month. Whatever their tactical differences, they will seek to build this united front only in order to ensure the continued exploitation of the resources and peoples of Africa.



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