

Bush's Africa tour: US seeks to counter growing Chinese influence

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26 February 2008

When the president of the United States goes on an overseas trip, it usually evokes a high level of press interest. For the most part, however, George Bush's visit to Africa last week scarcely made the headlines. A smaller than usual press corps could barely conceal the fact that its main interest lay in who would succeed him as president. It was as though Bush had become a figure of the past, even before he has left the White House.

The US ruling elite has important interests at stake in Africa. It is a continent that occupies a strategic position in relation to the Middle East and contains vital mineral resources. Moreover, it has become a continent in which US hegemony is being challenged by the rise of China. Bush's inability to advance key US interests, therefore, points to a major crisis in US foreign policy in the wake of the debacle in Iraq and Afghanistan.

"Just a decade ago," Bush said, "much of Africa seemed to be on the brink of collapse, and much of the world seemed content to let it collapse. Today, that's changing. A new generation of African leaders is stepping forward, and turning their continent around."

His words were belied by the death toll in Kenya, which has played a key strategic role in US foreign policy for decades. Election rigging led to ethnic cleansing and government repression that has claimed more than 1,000 lives. Bush despatched Condoleezza Rice to intercede between the warring factions but could not visit what would, just a few months ago, have been the high point of an American presidential tour of Africa. Nor was he able to visit the Horn of Africa, where a growing arc of conflict threatens the entire region. A visit to Sudan where the humanitarian disaster continues in Darfur was out of the question.

Ghana, which did feature on his itinerary, is one of the closest US allies. But there are fears that it may, like Kenya, descend into communal violence during or after the next elections.

His five-country itinerary included Benin, Tanzania, Rwanda, Ghana and Liberia. It did not include South Africa, the economic powerhouse of the continent; Nigeria, a major supplier of oil to the US and a long-time military ally; or Angola, another big oil producer that has just established close commercial relations with China. He also missed out resource-rich Congo and Uganda, the only country apart from Ethiopia to provide troops to support the US-backed regime in Somalia.

The fact that Bush was not invited to any major African country demonstrates in particular that none of these governments dared be publicly associated with him or his Africom plan, which amounts to a bid to reassert colonial power over Africa.

Africom was launched last year as a new unified military command specifically for Africa. Currently, operations are split between two US commands, with most of the continent coming under the auspices of the German-based US military. But the 15 members of the Southern African Development Community have agreed that none of them will host Africom. In addition, the US-backed Ethiopian invasion of Somalia last year provoked alarm in a number of African countries that have refused to make troops available to support the Ethiopian occupation. Only Uganda has contributed soldiers to the African Union force that is supposed to

replace Ethiopia.

Even Nigeria, which has had a long-term military relationship with the USA, is wary of the proposal to base Africom in Africa. It has increasingly turned to China for military hardware.

Bush was reduced to making highly undignified denials that his trip was intended to prepare the way for establishing an Africom headquarters, after he was met with significant protests in Tanzania. He told reporters that the purpose of his trip was primarily humanitarian. His aim was to discuss malaria prevention, AIDS treatment and development programmes.

"We do not contemplate adding new bases," Bush said. "In other words, the purpose of this is not to add military bases. I know there's rumours in Ghana: 'All Bush is coming to do is try to convince you to put a big military base here.' That's baloney. As they say in Texas, that's bull."

Throughout Africa, China has had an almost free hand while the US has been preoccupied in Iraq. Chinese leaders have visited Africa five times in recent years while this is only Bush's second visit. African countries have now begun to argue that the World Bank and the IMF have become irrelevant to them because they can get aid packages and investment from China without the strings that are attached to money from the US-backed international financial organisations.

Even Liberia, which was founded by freed American slaves and has always occupied a semi-colonial relationship with the US, has turned to China. President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf is frequently praised by the US administration, but Liberia has still not been granted debt relief. It is one of the poorest countries in the world—52 percent of the population live in extreme poverty—yet it is burdened by an estimated \$3.5 billion external debt which was incurred under former dictator Samuel Doe.

On a visit last year, President Hu Jintao cancelled \$10 million of Liberia's debt to China, waived duties on Liberian exports to China and announced an aid package worth \$25 million. The attraction for China is Liberia's raw materials, especially iron ore. Sinopec, China's second largest oil and gas company, has also signed an exploration deal with Liberia. China's interest in Liberia has been evident since it provided its largest ever contribution to a UN peacekeeping force when it sent 500 troops to take part in the UN mission there in 2004.

Speaking alongside Rwanda's President, Paul Kagame, Bush centred his only major policy statement during his tour on an attack on China. Referring to the five-year war in Sudan's western province of Darfur, he insisted that "human suffering ought to pre-empt commercial interests" and urged other nations to support tougher sanctions against Sudan.

Sudan is a significant producer of oil, which straddles the strategic Red Sea, the Maghreb, Central Africa and the Horn of Africa. In the past an ally of the US, the government in Khartoum has made a dramatic shift towards China, which has invested over \$15 billion in Sudan since 1999 and owns a 40 percent stake in the Greater Nile Petroleum Operating Co., which runs Sudan's oil fields.

The *Telegraph* described Bush's comments as "a thinly-disguised

reference to China, which has invested £8 billion in Sudan's oil industry in return for access to its six billion barrels of proven oil reserves. Beijing has also sold Omar al-Bashir, the president of Sudan, ground attack aircraft and stands accused, in effect, of bankrolling the Darfur war."

However, it continued, "Mr Bush had intended that threats of tougher sanctions could soon be backed up by a greater US military presence on African soil. But it emerged yesterday (February 19) that his hopes of opening military bases to boost security and peacekeeping efforts across the continent have been quietly shelved. The proposal to move the US's Africa command, Africom, from its present base in Germany has been postponed because not enough countries offered to host the bases."

Patrick Smith, who edits *Africa Confidential*, commented that US policy "appears to be at sea ... what is the foundation of the policy? Is it a security nexus based on militarisation or is it a much more development-oriented policy?"

If African leaders were reluctant to be seen meeting Bush, the same could not be said of Sir Bob Geldof, the ex-rock star turned charity entrepreneur. He joined the presidential press corps on Air Force One. He did not sit in the back with the press, but sat with the president, whom he is to interview for *Time* magazine and *Liberacion*.

Geldof claimed that Bush had done more for Africa than any other US president and berated the press for their failure to report the good news of Bush's aid effort in Africa. The President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR) was, Geldof said, "a highly effective initiative."

The UK newspaper the *Guardian* followed suit. It hailed Bush as "a good man in Africa." President Clinton's legacy in Africa, said an article that could have been read off from a White House press release, was the debacle in Somalia and the Rwandan genocide. Bush's legacy would be "greatly extending millions of lives" through PEPFAR.

PEPFAR was, the *Guardian* declared, "a 'revolution' that is transforming healthcare in Africa and has been praised as the most significant aid programme since the end of colonialism."

The readiness with which the *Guardian* and Geldof have sprung to Bush's side is an indication of the anxiety that the British and European political class feel at the relative decline of US global power. The *Guardian* has always been ready to criticise the US in the past, but the prospect of American defeat and decline fills the formerly liberal bourgeois and petty bourgeois layers for which it speaks with dread.

Bush introduced PEPFAR in 2003, under pressure from Secretary of State Colin Powell and the CIA, who warned that AIDS was a security threat to the US. The Bush administration has spent \$18.8 billion mostly in Africa. In Bush's last budget, He allocated \$30 billion over five years to the plan. The *Guardian* and Geldof have seized on it as their "bright spot" in Bush's foreign policy although they know that this money is tied to programmes that advocate sexual abstinence and deny the use of condoms to prevent AIDS transmission.

One third of the PEPFAR funds spent in Tanzania must go to abstinence programmes. PEPFAR provides funds to faith-based initiatives that allow Christian fundamentalist organisations to combine evangelism with the provision of anti-retroviral drugs. The hostility of these organisations to prostitutes and homosexuals has had a damaging effect on AIDS prevention work.

At the same time, the Bush administration is trying to prevent African countries using generic anti-retroviral drugs that would be cheaper than those produced by the big pharmaceutical companies. It is also attempting to make it more difficult for African countries to override intellectual property rights by declaring a health emergency as they are entitled to do under World Trade Organisation provisions when it would be in the interests of public health to do so. To consider PEPFAR in isolation and without taking into account the effect of the Bush administration's policy as a whole is an attempt to manipulate public opinion in favour of the White House.

US funding for health programmes is due to be reduced next year. Dr. Paul Zeitz, Executive Director of the Global AIDS Alliance, who has expressed favourable opinions about the work of PEPFAR in the past, issued a statement criticising Bush's funding plans for next year: "The sad truth is that while the president is shaking the hands of people living with HIV/AIDS, back in Washington his Administration and its allies in Congress are demanding flat-funding for AIDS programs for 2009-2013, along with a dramatic slowdown in the expansion of AIDS treatment."

"Incredibly," Zeitz continued, "he has even proposed cutting tuberculosis programs, despite the fact that extremely drug-resistant TB is ravaging Africa and has been identified as a danger to the United States by the Department of Homeland Security."

Bush's other African initiative is the Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC). He signed an aid package of \$662 million in Tanzania under this programme. It will be followed with \$698 million more over the next five years. The money is intended to improve electricity, water supply and roads. This is the largest MCC aid package yet agreed anywhere in Africa but is a comparatively small sum in relation to the need for such basic infrastructural projects.

While offering small handouts, the US is taking measures that actively damage the economies of African countries. Bush presented his visit to Benin as a triumph of philanthropy, but 38 percent of the population live below the poverty line. Most of the population are dependent on agriculture, especially cotton growing. President Thomas Yayi Boni of Benin has begged Bush to reduce the barriers to importing cotton into the US without success. "In my country, two people out of three live out of cotton." Subsidies, Yayi said, "cause a kind of dysfunctioning in our country and on the continent also."

Tanzania ranks 159 out of 177 countries on the UN's Human Development Index and

Rwanda is in position 161. These countries could hardly fail to be grateful for even Bush's miserly largesse. The same is true of Liberia, which is the only African country to volunteer to host the headquarters of Africom.

Bush's visit has done nothing to stem the growth of Chinese influence in Africa. His failure to do so poses the US ruling elite with a serious problem that, in the absence of a diplomatic solution, they will increasingly look to resolve by military means, as they have already attempted to do in Somalia. The US will not accept the eclipse of its power in Africa peacefully.



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