

## ***Bush No-Show in Mauritius Reflects Deeper Disdain***

by William Minter

In mid-December, in the midst of the controversy over racist remarks by Senator Trent Lott, Bush administration officials intimated that a presidential trip to Africa in January would demonstrate the U.S. president's sensitivity to African American concerns. If President George W. Bush had followed through on his plan to visit five African countries, Africans would have posed hard questions: Is your policy "just another trip"? Or are you willing to commit real resources to responding to the deadly threat of AIDS, and to other urgent African priorities?

An answer of a sort came just before Christmas, when a White House press release curtly announced that the trip was being postponed. Later Secretary of State Colin Powell also called off plans to fill in for President Bush at the U.S.-Africa consultation being held in Mauritius this week. Heading the U.S. delegation instead will be U.S. Trade Representative Robert Zoellick, who will tout the benefits to Africa of the Africa Growth and Opportunity Act (which mandated this second consultation), and pitch other U.S. policies for promoting free trade.

Both the reduced U.S. presence in Mauritius and the exclusive focus on trade accurately reflect the realities of current U.S. Africa policy. Washington policymakers are offering band-aids for the continent's gaping wounds, while pushing policies that add to the damage and deprive Africans of resources to fight back. This is evident in the U.S. willingness to use Africa as a military staging ground for war in the Middle East, while ignoring Africans' concerns for their own security.

It shows up as well in the stingy U.S. contribution to the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, amounting to only a tiny fraction of the \$ 3.5

billion a year that would be the fair U.S. contribution. Meanwhile, the administration proposes handing over some \$36 billion a year to rich investors by abolishing the tax on dividends. Last week UN Special Representative Stephen Lewis called rich countries' failure to respond to the AIDS pandemic "mass murder by complacency."

The administration brushes off findings that current "debt relief" programs leave desperately poor countries paying more to foreign creditors than they spend on the health needs of their people. And Bush refuses to act positively on global issues from women's reproductive rights to global warming, where the penalty for failure falls most heavily on Africa.

Bush's balance sheet is also deeply in the red even in the realm for which the U.S. claims most credit: trade policy. It is true that AGOA has opened some additional opportunities for textile exports from African countries. But the benefits from this are estimated at only about \$100 million to \$140 million a year, and only go to a few countries. An International Monetary Fund study estimates that these benefits could have been five times greater if the U.S. had not imposed extremely restrictive rules of origin for the materials used in exported textiles. Meanwhile, African exports to the U.S. continue to be dominated by oil.

In December Washington stood alone to block a World Trade Organization agreement to allow export of generic medicines from one developing country to another. African and other developing countries were outraged. The *New York Times* commented that Washington's position was "so obviously influenced by the drug companies that America is alienating nations whose support it needs on other trade issues."

As African countries face the combined impact of famine and AIDS, they also see their agriculture devastated by another killer: agricultural trade subsidies in the U.S. and Europe. Last year's U.S. farm bill, for example, added some \$83 billion in new subsidies for rich U.S. farmers, whose exports already undercut developing country farmers who produce rice, maize, and other food crops. Such subsidies also undercut African exports. In a report last fall, for example, Oxfam calculated that

U.S. cotton farmers received subsidies of \$3.9 billion. Oxfam estimated the damage to African cotton producers from these subsidies at about \$300 million a year.

Most official speeches in Mauritius will undoubtedly extol the potential mutual benefits of expanded U.S.-African trade. But that potential stands little chance of being realized with the current business-as-usual policy. When and if President Bush does visit Africa, he may seek to avoid answering the question of whether he

values African lives. Two years into his administration, the policy record leaves little doubt that the answer is "no."

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