

# foreign policy *in focus*



Interhemispheric Resource Center  
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## Africa

by William Minter, Senior Research Fellow, Africa Policy Information Center

*This overview of U.S. foreign policy in Africa is excerpted from the recently published IRC/IPS book, Global Focus: A New Foreign Policy Agenda 1997-1998. It is one of several regional and topical overviews published as part of the Foreign Policy In Focus series.*

Incoming UN Secretary General Kofi Annan, like his predecessor, is a highly skilled diplomat from the African continent. But the spectacle of the transition, unilaterally engineered by the U.S. in the midst of a Central Africa crisis that urgently called for considered attention, was not a promising indicator that the continent's concerns would be taken seriously. "Unhappily, our opinions haven't counted," noted Ivory Coast President Henri Bedie. *Washington Post* foreign editor Jim Hoagland put it bluntly: "The United States contributed mightily to paralyzing the United Nations . . . by letting a vengeful attempt to oust Secretary General Boutros Boutros-Ghali dominate the world organization while Zaire burned."

Substantive issues were absent from the debate. More generally, the absence of a coherent U.S. foreign policy agenda—except in the expansion of exports and investments to promising new markets—leaves U.S. policy decisions at the mercy of old and new prejudices, while ad hoc response to crises becomes more the norm than the exception. This is particularly serious for Africa, which, as compared with other world regions, depends more on multilateral institutions. During Africa's first post-independence era after colonization, spanning from 1960 to 1990, the continent was for the U.S. primarily an arena for super-power competition. The cold war is over, but its legacy remains. Landmines lie scattered over the countryside in Angola, Mozambique, and much of the Horn of Africa. Shattered states once high on the list for U.S. patronage or intervention include Somalia, Sudan, Liberia, Angola, and Zaire.

Africa's primary political agenda for that era focused

on independence, first from colonialism, then from white minority rule in the southern region of the continent. The U.S. expressed lip service support for Africa's agenda, while in practice repeatedly subordinating it to cold war imperatives and de facto racial bias. For a short time, nevertheless, the freedom struggle in South Africa and its echo in the anti-apartheid movement around the world imposed other priorities, and even succeeded in enacting U.S. sanctions over the veto of President Ronald Reagan.

Now, beyond slogans endorsing democracy, human rights, development, free markets and all other "good things," and unconvincing efforts to find a large enough threat in "rogue states," there is no overarching framework to justify and contextualize U.S. engagement with Africa. In the post-cold war, post-Mandela-election world, marginalizing African concerns seems the overwhelmingly dominant trend. This lack of interest in Africa is related to the continent's place in the world political economy, in which African countries average disproportionately lower than other regions on the development charts. Out of the 48 countries in the UN's "Low Human Development" category, 37 are in Africa.

The marginalizing of Africa also is tied to the politics of race in the United States. The usual stereotypes and ignorance about international issues are overlaid with a powerful racial dynamic. stereotypes about "ancient hatreds" when applied to Africa become stereotypes about "ancient tribal hatreds" with particularly misleading connotations of "primitiveness." The horrifying images of Africa's disasters are assimilated into one simplistic picture of chaos. While South Africa may be recognized as an emerging market and Egypt in the north is given importance as part of the Middle East strategic equation, most of the continent is assigned to the category of what Professor Michael Mandelbaum writing in *Foreign*

Affairs terms “social work,” i.e., a candidate primarily for welfare or emergency aid.

The echoes of the welfare debate are not accidental, and foreign policy towards Africa cannot be addressed adequately, from any part of the political spectrum, unless the debate takes account of the continued significance of race in both U.S. domestic and international inequalities. It is still true that Africa is largely invisible even among the “attentive public” on foreign policy issues.

The fundamental requirement for a new U.S. policy on Africa is a shift that makes Africa visible. As analyst Salih Booker of the Council on Foreign Relations notes, “An African renaissance is occurring which is largely invisible to the U.S. public and the broader international community.” Whatever the multiple failures of the post-colonial order throughout Africa, that era has produced a new generation, the first to benefit in large numbers from post-independence expansion of education. As a generation, they are well aware of the faults both of the global order and of African elites.

At many levels, Africa is now engaging seriously the challenges of the “Second Independence.” The term, first coined by revolutionaries in the Congo (now Zaire) in the 1960’s, expressed the conviction that political independence from colonialism had only succeeded in replacing one elite with another, failing to meet the demands for political and economic freedom of African peoples. U.S. policy must be based on the recognition that Africans—from civil society as well as responsive governments and regional institutions—are now taking up that challenge. The number of such individuals and organizations engaged in pro-democracy, human rights, and development initiatives in almost every African country is larger than ever in the past.

On issue after issue, nevertheless, the international community is inextricably involved, whether in calls for UN support for peacekeeping, for reform of the international financial institutions, or in deciding on bilateral relations. And in many cases the interna-

tional response can tip the balance. The U.S. in turn, by default or by active engagement, has much to do with the moral and political will as well as the policy content of the international response. The following essays touch on only some of the issues necessary to reshape an Africa policy for the future. Given that there is much uncertainty about how to approach the complex political and economic problems in the region, no easy answers are offered. However, there is a strong consensus on many points, such as the rejection of policies that advocate complete reliance on the magic of unfettered markets or that show indifference in the face of genocide. Although all the right proposals for a more responsible U.S. policy toward Africa are not yet in place, there is widespread agreement that U.S. policymakers should listen to a diversity of voices, both here and on the African Continent, to ensure that U.S. policies toward Africa respond to the interests of the majorities rather than U.S. or African elites.

### **Security, Conflict Resolution and Humanitarian Assistance**

Africa is still widely perceived as a single country, and not accurately understood as a highly diverse continent three times the size of the U.S. and containing more than fifty distinct countries. Most of the continent’s countries are now at peace, whatever other problems they face. Having experienced among the most destructive conflicts of the 1970s and 1980s, countries such as South Africa, Namibia, Zimbabwe, Mozambique, Ethiopia, Eritrea, and Uganda are all dealing with post-conflict rather than conflict issues. Others, such as Tanzania, Kenya, Botswana, Cameroon, Ghana, Ivory Coast, Senegal, Benin, and Tunisia, to name only a few from around the continent, have avoided post-colonial internal war, despite smaller-scale conflict and the cross-border impact of refugee flows from neighboring countries.

Nevertheless, full-scale conflict in too many countries and the absence of minimal security for citizens in many others endangers not only the continent’s image but also its future. Neither democracy nor

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development can advance if citizens are at the mercy of unrestrained gunmen. In contrast to the Organization of African Unity's policy since the 1960s of not interfering in the internal affairs of member states, there is today a newly emerging consensus. It maintains that because effects of internal conflicts often spill over borders, neighboring states and indeed the continent at large, may be impacted and so must respond. Genocidal violence is in theory—if not yet in practice—the concern of the entire human community.

Yet the international community (both Africa-wide and worldwide) often lacks the political will to respond. When governments and humanitarian NGOs do mobilize in response to a crisis, lines of accountability are often vague or ignored—and consequently often fail to meet their mission goals. One fundamental question in global intervention includes who takes responsibility to respond. In a crisis, neighboring countries are often the most intensely engaged. This can be an advantage but also a handicap in resolving conflicts. African regional and continental institutions have been taking a more active role in many crises, a trend which should be encouraged. But the scale of the military, organizational, and logistical resources needed means that the global community must offer assistance.

Few doubt that the UN and other agencies need to improve their efficiency, management capacity, and accountability. But unjustified and indiscriminate UN-bashing has become commonplace in U.S. politics—even though the general public continues to hold a far more positive view towards the United Nations. The Clinton administration has also used the institution as a scapegoat for its own failed military intervention in Somalia. Reform proposals are too often a euphemism for downsizing: they are designed to cut costs rather than to increase the UN's capacity to respond effectively to crises, such as the genocide in Rwanda in 1994 and threats of escalated genocidal violence in Burundi in late 1996.

The issue of who intervenes when, where, and under what guidelines is rightly controversial. There is no truly neutral, purely humanitarian, intervention, even when all that is done is to provide food for refugees. Even nonmilitary resources may tend to strengthen one military force on the ground, while weakening another. And yet there are no clear guidelines for the "blue helmets" of the UN or any other external force to distinguish the good guys and the bad guys, no adequate equivalent of the "white hats" and the "blackhats" of classic Western movies.

This is a serious issue when the international involvement is the traditional "neutral:" peacekeeping missions. The dilemmas become acute when there is no minimum agreement among local military factions (as in Somalia and Liberia) or when the international force is being asked to intervene to prevent massive human rights abuses or to stop genocide. There is legitimate fear that whatever the humanitarian urgency, the troops will end up doing the wrong thing. Yet there are extreme cases—the clearest being Rwanda in 1994—where timely intervention could have saved hundreds of thousands of lives. Instead the international community stood aside until over half a million people were killed, ironically intervening later with humanitarian aid to refugees that ended up sustaining the military forces responsible for the genocide.

Given the record of U.S. intervention, many have a justified skepticism toward the involvement of American troops or logistical support. However, in practical terms, whatever the nationalities of the troops, and whether they are under an UN umbrella or under a regional African umbrella, only the U.S. has the airlift and logistical capacity to move military forces fast enough and far enough under such circumstances. Given its capacities, the U.S. has an obligation to provide greater resources to African conflict resolution and peacekeeping efforts. In short, it should pay its dues, both literally and figuratively.

Currently, the largest UN peacekeeping contingent on the continent is in Angola, where the peace agreement signed in late 1994 is threatened by repeated delays. Angola faces a grave risk of a resurgence of war or an indefinite continuation of the current deadlock with two separate armies and little security for civilians. In Liberia, regional West Africa peacekeepers are the key force on the ground, but the chances of implementing the latest agreement depend on greater support from outside the region. U.S. cold war policies were a major cause of the conflict and destruction in both Angola and Liberia. The U.S. has been engaged in supporting peace settlements in both countries, but at critical points has failed to weigh in strongly enough against forces violating the accords.

The entire Central African region is a zone of massive insecurity: ethnic violence in Burundi, continued humanitarian crisis and the threat of further violence in Zaire, and the explosive combination of returned refugees and genocide survivors in Rwanda. A policy of hoping for the best, while downsizing the capacity for international response, is a certain recipe for renewed disaster.

## **Democratization & Human Rights**

Support for democratization and human rights is in principle one of the cornerstones of U.S. policy in Africa. Public pressure against abusive regimes, support for elections, aid to a wide variety of groups in African civil society—all are on the standard list of policy instruments. Despite the relative consensus on this general policy framework, however, there are substantive concerns about U.S. policy in practice.

Probably the most predictable, as well as the most disturbing, issue is the pervasive inertia in the face of human rights abuses. Human rights are almost always given lip service, but far too often in practice, they are shoved to the side in favor of economic ties and of short-term conflict resolution. High-profile criticism and, at the extreme, sanctions, are not appropriate in all cases, of course. However, in many cases the U.S. response has been far too weak. With respect to Nigeria, Kenya, Zaire, Ethiopia, and many other countries, the response to repression, human rights abuses, or political exclusion of opponents has typically been to speak softly and carry a small stick, or none at all. The U.S. has been more consistently willing to exert meaningful pressure to gain concessions on economic issues, than to use effective leverage in support of human rights and democracy.

To the extent that the U.S. has become engaged, through the Agency for International Development (AID) and other bilateral agencies, in support of civil society and prodemocracy forces, there remain substantive issues of both quantity and quality. With strong pressure from Congress to cut back on funds available for almost all international involvement, many promising initiatives—including U.S. support for multilateral initiatives—have been ruled out for budgetary reasons. To give only one set of examples, programs for international human rights monitors in conflict situations, as well as the international genocide tribunal, have been hampered or weakened by lack of timely funding and personnel.

Critics also maintain that in many cases U.S. programs inappropriately promote the uncritical transfer of U.S. views to other societies, neglect the substance of true democratic participation in favor of formalities of electoral systems, and ignore the potential for dialogue with Africans themselves about priorities in building democratic institutions suitable for each country. At a time when the World Bank and other multilateral institutions are increasingly realizing the need to listen to grassroots critics, the U.S. still gives little opportunity for the intended beneficiaries to engage in dialogue with policymakers on the results and process of bilateral programs.

On this set of issues, consensus is most easily reached among human rights advocates on negative measures against abusive regimes. The clearest case is the call for comprehensive sanctions against the Nigerian military regime. In a host of other cases (Kenya, Ethiopia, Zambia, Cameroon, and others), African prodemocracy forces want the U.S. to use more effective leverage against human rights abuses. The U.S. government is critical of Sudan but its concerns emphasize the regime's support for international terrorism while largely ignoring the government's own gross human rights violations and its repression of internal opposition forces. The issue of U.S. financial support, through AID or other agencies, for human rights and prodemocracy initiatives, is more controversial. The U.S., which had much to do with supporting previous undemocratic regimes, has an obligation to provide such support. The long history of U.S. manipulation of such aid for cold war purposes, and the pervasive paternalism and insensitivity to local opinion of even well-intentioned U.S. engagement, provide ample reason for caution. An ideological purism on this point is, however, unlikely to be helpful to democratic forces in many African countries. As in the parallel issue of development aid, support for democratization and projects to strengthen of civil society should not be posed as yes or no. Rather, decisions should be made collaboratively about terms, guidelines, conditions, monitoring, and accountability of such programs.

## **Sustainable Development & Social Equity**

The issue of what policies are most effective in promoting sustainable development that can benefit the majority of Africa's people is complex. There are no magic formulas to ensure success. U.S. policy should integrate different components rather than placing sustainable development and private sector approaches as contradictory alternatives. Sustainable development should be the goal, meaning economic development, social equity, and preservation of environmental capital that protects the options of future generations. As Africa advances towards this goal, the potential for mutually beneficial ties between the U.S. and Africa also grows.

Trade and aid policies should be seen as complementary, rather than mutually exclusive options applied to different sets of countries. U.S. promises of increased trade and investment in Africa have not materialized, but the potential for expansion remains enormous. To develop this potential and ensure that it benefits ordinary citizens both in Africa and the U.S., however, requires sustained investment in human resources and infrastructure, understanding that the payoffs will take time.

The debates over aid and, more broadly, U.S. economic ties to Africa, echo those discussed more generally in this volume. There is the question of the quantity of resources dedicated to development. Some observers question if particular programs support development aims, waste taxpayers' money, or even undermine development. There is the need for results-based evaluation of programs, regardless of whether they are implemented primarily through governmental agencies, the private sector, or the voluntary sector. And finally questions arise, even when assistance projects are beneficial if they are used as leverage to impose economic policies that sabotage long-term development.

The Africa advocacy community opposes cuts in development aid. While recognizing that many programs are not helpful, and that aid leverage is sometimes used to impose inappropriate structural adjustment policies, Africa advocacy groups have joined with church and development groups in opposing congressional cuts. Instead, investment in sustainable development, both through bilateral and multilateral programs, should be maintained, improved and delinked from inappropriate conditionalities.

The effectiveness of both trade and aid will also be significantly affected by the adequacy of measures to address the serious problem of indebtedness of African states. Debt relief is urgently needed and most deserved by those African countries indicating a serious commitment to development and the eradication of poverty.

### **Shaping and Changing Gender Relations**

Highlighted by the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in September 1995, there is an increasing recognition that the solution of the full range of Africa's problems cited above will hinge in large part on the extent to which Africa's women move towards full participation at all levels. Women and children are disproportionately the victims of war and displacement. The voices of women, if heeded, are often the most eloquent and coherent for peacemaking. Support for the small farmer and rural food security, as well as for micro-enterprise and viable survival strategies in Africa's sprawling cities, in

practice must mean support for women, who are disproportionately represented in these life-sustaining roles. Concerns for equity, human rights promotion, and political participation must integrally support women's rights, including protection against domestic and sexual violence. World Bank President James Wolfensohn has joined many earlier advocates in noting that investment in the education of girls is among the most cost-effective development action that countries and international institutions can take.

African women's groups are both growing in number and establishing a wider range of initiatives. But they face many difficulties, including lack of organizational capacity, traditional prejudices, and unsupportive governments. Many of the initiatives promoting women's rights have been advanced by multilateral institutions, particularly UN specialized agencies, which face massive budget problems, largely as a result of U.S. cutbacks. U.S. government support for bilateral and multilateral family planning programs, vital to women's health, has been restricted by Congress. Women's rights need to be integrated not only into economic or development assistance programs but also into human rights criteria that should influence U.S. bilateral relations with African countries.

### **The Bottom Line**

How the U.S. responds to Africa will be a critical test of its responses to both global and domestic issues of security, human rights and social equity. Just as the failure to address race in the U.S. is a recipe for disaster, similarly issues of global equity cannot be addressed without careful attention to the particular ways in which racial oppression has impacted the U.S. role in the world. The allocation of resources and of policy attention alike will reflect the choice between a neo-Darwinian model of the world divided into winners and losers and a vision of a world community in which the U.S. is a responsible and generous participant. U.S. engagement, not as world policeman or as welfare donor, but simply as a member of the world community with responsibilities proportional to resources, is required both by moral obligation and national interest.

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