

President Clinton Missed a Unique Opportunity during Nigeria Visit

by Goddy Ikeh and Lawrence K. Freeman

Most Nigerians, who expected an outright cancellation of the country's foreign debt of more than \$30 billion during the Aug. 26-27 visit of U.S. President Bill Clinton, may find unacceptable the promise that the United States will support positive considerations by the international financial community of debt reduction for Nigeria in a multilateral context, and "a generous Paris Club rescheduling for this year." Unfortunately, President Clinton, on his first visit to Nigeria (after snubbing the most populous nation in Africa during his eight-day visit to the continent in 1998), did little to deal with the substantial problems that have plagued Nigeria for years. While in Nigeria, President Clinton praised the country's nascent democracy under the leadership of President Olusegun Obasanjo. However, what President Obasanjo had really hoped for, was that the American leader would make an unequivocal commitment to cancel (not just reschedule) Nigeria's huge debt, and relieve the nation of 110-115 million people of this oppressive burden.

President Obasanjo's unrealistic hopes were dashed, and he will now have to make do with the fact that President Clinton's visit has given Nigeria a new "international profile" after years of being scorned by the West as allegedly corrupt and dictatorial. As one knowledgeable Nigerian commented: "Except for the promises and grants announced on the second day of the visit, which are directed at some specific sectors, there is no cheerful news for the downtrodden."

Clinton Reverses U.S. Attitude toward Nigeria

President Clinton did say, that he was "greatly concerned" over visa problems, which prevent most Nigerians from being able to travel to the United States, and that his administration would work toward an amicable solution to the problem. Apart from the debt and visa questions, a 16-point declaration was jointly issued after the bilateral talks between Nigerian and U.S. officials on Aug. 26. In the transportation sector, the two leaders welcomed the historic signing of an Open Skies Agreement between the countries, which will allow the first direct flights between the United States and Lagos since such flights were grounded in 1993.

Other initiatives announced include \$20 million in U.S. assistance to fight AIDS/HIV, polio, and malaria, and \$2 million for medicine that will prevent pregnant AIDS victims from infecting their children *in utero*. Also during the two-day visit, the U.S. Export-Import Bank signed an agreement

to provide \$1.2 billion in guarantees for loans to Nigeria. Among other issues agreed upon were the challenges to regional security, and U.S. government support for regional peacekeeping and conflict resolution efforts in West Africa was reaffirmed.

Millions more dollars will be spent to upgrade and train Nigeria's military, in recognition of the high cost of its deployment in carrying out peacekeeping missions in Africa. The two countries agreed to improve the professionalism, skills, and welfare of the Nigerian Armed Forces, and to ensure continued commitment to civilian control of the military.

The IMF and the Internet Won't Help

Despite pleas from President Obasanjo during the last year for cancellation of Nigeria's debt as a "democracy dividend," the best President Clinton could offer was that he would urge the creditor clubs—Paris and London—which hold the bulk of the Nigeria's debt, to provide some relief. The United States is owed only about \$58 million out of the country's total debt. Asked about Nigeria's debt burden during his first press conference with President Obasanjo in the capital, Abuja, President Clinton responded that now that Nigeria is working with the IMF, and has shown a commitment to economic reform—meaning a commitment to open up Nigeria to the free-trade looting policies of privatization and globalization—the United States would request "generous debt rescheduling."

In his address to the Joint Assembly, as parliament is known, Clinton alluded to remarks that Jesse Jackson, his special envoy to Africa, had made, that "to help Nigeria involves more than the government; it's also Wall Street and Silicon Valley. That's what is growing our economy, and it can help to grow yours." Not only did President Clinton foolishly repeat such nonsense, but, unfortunately, major Nigerian leaders, elected officials, and businessmen wish to believe it as well.

In his last major speech on Aug. 27, at the Abuja Sheraton, the American President could not control his enthusiasm for promoting the role of the information society and the Internet as a solution to Nigeria's depressed economy. At various times, he correctly discussed the need for improving Nigeria's collapsed infrastructure, and the need to "rebuild the agricultural sector" and "broaden the manufacturing sector." However, he also told his audience that "the information revolution

has changed everything,” through the explosive growth of the Worldwide Web. After acknowledging that half of Nigerians “don’t have access to clean water,” he nonetheless concluded that the solution is to “broaden access to information technology” by expanding the number of Nigeria’s 9,000 Internet users to 9 million. This, he said, “you can do in no time.”

The absurdity of such a proposal, as the authors have personally observed, is that even the wealthiest Nigerians lack a continuous supply of electrical power. In any functioning society, computers and information gathered through the Internet will play a role. But, to actually propose to African nations, which lack electricity, clean water, adequate health care, schools, transportation corridors, basic housing—and the list goes on—that computer technology, rather than *real, productive* technologies, will increase the productivity of the economy, displays an utter lack of understanding regarding the fundamentals of society and economy.

The Nation-State and the General Welfare

In his address to Nigerian legislators, President Clinton described Nigeria as a country richly endowed in human and material resources, and he deplored ethnic and religious divisions, saying that it is of utmost importance that Christians and Muslims should continue to live together in peace. He noted that despite the existence of more than 250 ethnic groups, the peoples of Nigeria had stayed together as one. “Your ethnic diversity is a great opportunity if we can find amity, tolerate it, and believe that how we worship and speak are important,” Clinton said. Stressing why Nigerian must remain an indissoluble nation, President Clinton said, “You have stayed together in one nation, you have fought for democracy together, achievements have come while working together. . . . We have to find honorable ways of reconciling our differences on common grounds.”

“The world needs Nigeria to succeed. Every great nation must become more than its parts,” the President said, to the applause of many of his listeners.

President Clinton’s defense of the nation-state of Nigeria is important, but he missed a unique opportunity to actually advance a policy that would lead to a *revolutionary* change in the deplorable living conditions in Nigeria, as well as the whole of Africa. The struggle for simple human existence is worse for the 550 million people living in Sub-Saharan Africa, than anywhere else on the planet. It has now been 40 years since the nations of Africa began to free themselves from the colonial powers of Europe. Yet, the case can be made, that there has been no real progress for Sub-Saharan Africans over almost a half-century. Whatever small gains did occur, the spread of AIDS and other epidemics have begun to reduce longevity, below what it was when the colonial powers ruled.

With the global monetary-financial system in its final days of existence, any leader who is not preparing to establish a post-IMF economic system, is failing miserably. It is correct and proper for President Clinton to lend his support to Nigeria,

and defend unity of the nation-state against those who want to dismember it. However, to propose that the solution will be found in the “information society,” rather than investing in large-scale infrastructure projects that will lead to a net increase in the physical goods required to raise the living standards of hundred of millions of economically depressed Africans, is the height of economic insanity.

It is the right time for Nigerian leaders to give up their delusions about what to expect from Western financial institutions. The IMF system is hopelessly bankrupt; the only sane policy is to start preparing for what comes after it.

Most Africans like President Clinton, and respect the power of the U.S. Presidency. That is why he missed a great opportunity, while in Abuja, to work with African leaders to forge new, anti-globalization policies that would actually lead to an improvement in the “general welfare” for the poor populations of Africa. Under the present conditions, when the world is faced with dangerous global economic and strategic crises, it is time for the leaders of African nations to take personal responsibility for the world.

Allies for a “New Bretton Woods System,” as proposed by Lyndon H. LaRouche, Jr., can be found by looking toward Asia. Suitable arrangements can be made with Asian nations to trade future surpluses of food which can be produced in Africa, for the capital goods desperately needed by the nations of Africa to lift up their depressed economies.

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