

Clinton gets out front on Africa policy

by William Jones

President Clinton has taken the lead once again in focussing attention on the crisis in Africa, calling for \$70 billion in new global debt relief, in the keynote to the U.S.-Africa Ministerial meeting held at the U.S. State Department on March 16, in which 46 African nations participated. In so doing, the President personally took the initiative to put Africa back on the front-burner of U.S. policy.

Since his trip to Africa last year, Clinton has been working to push through Congress a bill entitled the "Africa Growth and Opportunity Act." Although it has bipartisan support, many in the Congressional Black Caucus considered it wrong-headed, with too much emphasis on free trade and economic reform and too little on dealing with the overriding problem of the debt, which is stifling African economies. The bill was passed by the House last year, but not by the Senate. It has been revived again this year.

A bill introduced this year by Rep. Jesse Jackson, Jr. (D-Ill.), entitled the "Hope for Africa Act," focusses on the fundamental question of African debt (see accompanying article). It calls for massive debt relief as a prerequisite for "growth" and "opportunity." The Jackson bill also places the onus where it belongs—on the policies of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank, which have imposed additional heavy debt burdens and austerity requirements on African nations. Jackson's bill has been cosponsored by 51 members so far, and will draw support away from the flawed administration bill, perhaps pressuring the administration to address the debt problem more directly.

Judging from Clinton's remarks at the Africa Ministerial meeting, the President himself is shifting the focus toward the debt problem. "Today, I ask the international community to take actions which could result in forgiving \$70 billion in global debt relief," the President said. "Our goal is to ensure that no country committed to fundamental reform is left with a debt burden that keeps it from meeting its people's basic human needs and spurring growth."

The President's proposal includes complete forgiveness of all bilateral concessional loans to the poorest countries, and "deeper and broader reduction" of other bilateral debts. The President urged donor countries to provide 90% of development assistance on a grant basis, and to make additional contributions in order to help finance the initiative. He also called on the IMF to sell some of its gold for this purpose, and indicated that he would take up these proposals at the next

Group of Seven meeting in June. How much cooperation the President will receive from the Republican Congress or from the IMF leadership, remains to be seen.

Problems in U.S. policy remain

The conference revealed some of the big problems remaining in U.S. Africa policy, which is dominated by Al Gore's Principals Committee. Nowhere is this more clear than in U.S. policy toward Sudan. One of the most fertile nations in Africa, Sudan could easily become the bread-basket of the continent. The United States, however, under the influence of Defense Secretary William Cohen and Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, has attempted to isolate the government of the Republic of Sudan. Under the direction of Assistant Secretary of State Susan Rice, Sudan was excluded from this meeting of African nations, on the false pretext that it supports terrorism.

Even after the insane U.S. bombing of the Al-Shifa pharmaceutical plant in Khartoum last year, a move which is widely considered to have been based on false information regarding the factory's alleged role in Osama Bin Laden's terrorist network, the United States has refused to back down from its obstinate policy toward Sudan, despite considerable opposition to that policy from within the State Department itself. In this respect, the new Africa initiative is certainly not all-inclusive.

Making all its initiatives compatible with the free-trade paradigm which dominates administration policy, and lacking the courage to buck the IMF bureaucracy, the Clinton administration has not undertaken the type of dirigistic measures which could tackle the problems in Africa head-on. Instead, the aid bills, the Africa Growth and Opportunity Act in particular, pussy-foot around the real problems, creating the illusion that the workings of the market will solve everything. As Rice's Africa show-case model, Uganda, clearly shows, these market reforms often result in the worst type of brutality and corruption. And yet, the seriousness of the situation in Africa, and steadily growing support for Africa within the United States—especially, but by no means limited to, the black community—might force through some real action.

A key factor in accomplishing that will be the desire on the part of the President himself to make a difference in Africa. As he expressed it at the Africa Ministerial: "Africa is the ancient cradle of humanity, but it is also a remarkably young continent. When I traveled through the streets of the African cities and I saw the tens of thousands, the hundreds of thousands of young people who came out to see me, I wanted them to have long, full healthy lives." Laudable as the debt forgiveness initiative is, to achieve such a noble goal will require a "Marshall Plan" effort for Africa, rather than the present piecemeal approach of throwing in a few new lines of credit and aid to the beleaguered continent—which is still under the watchdog eye of the IMF bureaucracy.