

INTERNATIONAL

Africa trade bill off to fast start

By Jim Lobe

Special to Sentinel-Voice
WASHINGTON (IPS)—

A bill to promote U.S. trade and investment in Africa, which fell victim to powerful textile and labor interests last year, has exploded to a fast new start through Congress.

A key subcommittee of the House of Representatives recently unanimously approved the latest version of the Africa Growth and Opportunity Act, after concluding a session of overwhelmingly favorable testimony.

Managers of the bill said they plan to have the entire House of Representatives, which passed the bill by a large margin last March, approve it Feb. 23. It will then go to the Senate where it bogged down last year.

Congressional staffers working on the bill believed they had a better chance of prevailing over textile interests in the Senate this year. "There are a lot more people involved in this now," said Mike Williams, a key strategist behind the bill.

That support was evident on Capitol Hill. Secretary of Commerce William Daley was joined by top corporate executives, ambassadors from Senegal, Mauritius and Uganda, former U.S. ambassador to the United Nations Andrew Young, and former Republican vice-presidential candidate Jack Kemp in appealing for swift passage of the bill.

Opposing the bill were Illinois Congressman Jesse Jackson, Jr., who offered his own "Hope for Africa Act" and representatives of textile interests who played a key role in stopping the bill last year in the Senate.

The act, which has been opposed by some labor groups and non-governmental organizations is designed to boost U.S. commercial interests in sub-Saharan Africa, a region long dominated by former colonial powers.

Economic ties between the United States and Africa have been minimal. U.S. exports to the region account for only about one percent of total U.S.

exports, while African imports here — mostly oil from Angola and Nigeria — account for only about two percent of all imports.

At the same time, U.S. investment in Africa — deployed mostly in South Africa and Nigeria — remains less than one percent of all U.S. investment overseas.

Among other provisions, the bill would substantially increase the number of African-made goods that could enter the U.S. market duty-free. It also authorized the Overseas Private Investment Corporation to provide some \$650 million in investment guarantees and credits for U.S. companies doing business in Africa, notably for infrastructure projects and new forums for African and U.S. business interests to meet and cooperate.

Clinton tried hard to get the bill passed last year before his unprecedented, 11-day trip to the region late last March. The law was billed as a tangible expression of U.S.

commitment to Africa in the post-Cold War era.

Administration officials said they welcomed the unusually fast action on the bill by the powerful House Ways and Means Committee particularly in light of rising criticism from within Africa. This followed Washington's failure to follow up Clinton's trip with major new initiatives and its apparent helplessness in preventing the outbreak and spread of conflicts in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Sierra Leone, Angola and between Eritrea and Ethiopia.

There still remained opposition to the bill focused on the conditions which would have to be met for interested African nations to benefit from the act. To be eligible, countries would have to make "continual progress toward establishing a market-based economy."

Such progress would be measured, among other factors, by compliance with structural adjustment programs, liberalization of

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United States, Africa seek closer army ties

CAPE TOWN, South Africa (AP) — Defense Secretary William Cohen and his South African counterpart laid a foundation last week for closer military ties and agreed there is no direct military role for the United States in resolving sub-Saharan Africa's many civil wars.

"The military option is no solution to the problems of this area," said Defense Minister Joe Modise, a former leader of the military arm of the African National Congress, which led the long fight against apartheid and won South Africa's first all-race elections in 1994.

Modise, seated beside Cohen at a news conference in the 17th century Castle of Good Hope overlooking the Atlantic Ocean, said his country welcomed the United States' willingness to share its expertise in peacekeeping and its diplomatic support for

African democracy.

Cohen said Modise "outlined the dimensions" of long-running conflicts in Angola and Congo.

"We both agree, I believe, that diplomacy is really the only solution, that there are no military solutions," Cohen said. "We try to play whatever diplomatic role we can whenever we are invited to do so."

Cohen also met with Deputy President Thabo Mbeki at the presidential offices in downtown Cape Town. Afterward Mbeki told reporters there was no question of direct U.S. participation in African peacekeeping.

"Nobody, as far as I know, has raised questions about the United States Army coming into Africa," Mbeki said. He said African nations want to build their own capacity for regional peacekeeping — with some U.S. technical

assistance — and integrate that with missions mandated by the United Nations.

Cohen and Modise gave their stamp of approval to draft diplomatic papers that are intended to set a legal framework for U.S. military activities in South Africa, starting with a regional peacekeeping exercise in April in which two U.S. Air

Force C-130 planes will participate.

A formal exchange of the diplomatic notes later will enable the American transport planes to fly troops from several sub-Saharan African countries to South Africa for the exercise, dubbed Blue Crane, involving about 4,000

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WORLD BRIEFS

PRESIDENT KABILA BANS EXISTING PARTIES IN CONGO

KINSHASA (IPS) - Enraged Congolese politicians say the decision by President Laurent-Desire Kabila to dissolve the existing 400 political parties, when he lifted a ban on multi-party democracy recently, infringes on the freedom of association in the Democratic Republic of Congo. The law, governing the activities of political parties and organizations, which was decreed on Jan. 31, dissolved all the 400 parties and called upon those wishing to continue to operate to register at the ministry of interior within 30 days. The application takes three months to process. Alphonse Lupumba Kamanda, chairman of the opposition Republican Front, described the decree as "wicked, in its content, and against the elementary principles of democracy." "Kabila nurtures the illusion of dictating to political parties the way they should be run. That is simply an aberration," he said, vowing that his party "will fight for the repeal of the law."

BUDGET CUTS IN JAMAICA EXPECTED TO HIT HARD

KINGSTON (IPS) — Reactions have been mixed to the Jamaican government's recent admission that it cannot afford its \$3.6 billion budget and must cut public expenditures. The budget has been cut from \$3.6 billion to \$3.5 billion. Finance Minister Omar Davies said the government had expected to borrow some \$440 million from external sources to help finance the budget but to date has only managed to obtain \$272 million, leaving a gap of \$168 million. In order to bridge that gap, the government had to increase its domestic borrowing. "The crisis in Asia and other parts of Europe has dampened the prospect (of borrowing from overseas), making money hard to come by," Davies said. Some argue that while the budget cut was necessary, rather than slashing capital expenditures for social programs like health and infrastructure projects the government should have cut recurrent expenditures dealing primarily with salaries, including the salaries of government officials. "Any economic decision taken in any part of the world in which the government of the day has to cut its budget or increase taxation or put mechanisms in place to mop up liquidity will have some negative impact on the lives of the poor," he said. "It is not that you willfully put systems in place to affect the poor, but it is unavoidable."

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