

INTERNATIONAL

Africa's stability key part of world security

By D'Ivoire Johnson
Special to Sentinel-Voice

MINNEAPOLIS (NNPA) — International policymakers have often subordinated African issues to address problems in other parts of the world.

It is an error that some experts say has direct implications for global security, which may prove costly in the global war on terrorism.

"There is no one strategy for how [U.S. policy] deals with African problems," said George Moose, former ambassador to Senegal and Benin.

He added that post-Cold War policy toward Africa has been characterized by a piecemeal approach to dealing with HIV/AIDS, development and security and that many policymakers have underestimated the importance of African security.

"During the Cold War, Africa was indeed perceived in hard security terms," but "when the Cold War ended, a false assumption was made [that] Africa no longer figured into the tension between the Soviet Union," Moose said.

But failure to prioritize African security has led to greater problems for the world.

The 1994 Rwandan genocide left a permanent stain on the conscience of the international community, when close to one million people were killed within one month. And it is in the aftermath of such destruction that many African countries struggle

with weak institutions and failing governments.

"The same conditions that allow al-Qaeda to develop in Afghanistan exist in Africa," Moose said.

"They present opportunities for criminal gangs and terrorists like al-Qaeda."

When al-Qaeda bombed the American embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in 1998, Osama bin Laden was living in Sudan.

Now, the U.S. State Department has accused this same government that provided a training ground for al-Qaeda of plotting an ethnic genocide on over 1.5 million Black Sudanese.

"What better place to go than somewhere that is failing?" said Wynfred Russell, instructor of Contemporary African Issues and West African History at the University of Minnesota. "It's an invitation — these guys are shopping around looking for another Afghanistan," he said.

Russell, who was born in Liberia, added that double standards in western policy toward Africa contribute to existing problems.

He points to the relative inaction by U.S. officials to the situation in Darfur, [Sudan] to represent how the U.S. responds to a crisis in Africa.

"On the one hand they say it is genocide, but they haven't done anything," Russell said.

"Some of these western countries have economic interests in Sudan, and that is

why they are dragging their feet."

But why have international powers been excessively hesitant when dealing with African affairs? The answer is a combination of fear, racism and a general lack of interest.

"Africa is always a second thought on behalf of western powers and policymakers," Russell said. "The U.S. especially, is quick to wash its hands of Africa."

This ambivalence toward Africa is fueled by longstanding racial attitudes. "We still haven't shaken off all of the racist attitudes toward Africa," said Russell.

"Everything pertaining to Africa goes through that same racist system."

He added that a lack of interest in African affairs by African-Americans feeds into the way that Africa is treated.

A poll taken during Liberia's civil conflict indicated that 82 percent of Blacks polled were against U.S. involvement.

"That was very disappointing," Russell said. "I don't think people are going to take Africa seriously if the people of African descent don't take Africa seriously," he added.

But even when the U.S. has intervened in African affairs, the results were not always positive.

The movie "Blackhawk Down," based on the 1993 U.S. intervention in Somalia, remains a contemporary symbol of what is considered U.S. humanitarian intervention in

Africa.

During this conflict, 18 U.S. soldiers died and two Blackhawk helicopters were shot down, prompting a removal of troops by then-U.S. President Clinton.

"Everybody looked at the experience in Somalia and became frightened," Moose said. "That experience caused some serious hesitation in getting involved in African conflicts — that is what conditioned the slow response to the Rwandan genocide," he added.

But Russell is not convinced that the defeat suffered in Somalia provides reason enough to disengage with Africa. "It's a shameless alibi for them to not get involved in Africa — to try and use the situation in Somalia to not get involved," Russell said.

"They always hide behind the national security interests" but, "there are humanitarian interests that could be used," he added.

Present conflicts in Sierra Leone, Liberia, the Ivory Coast, the Democratic Republic of Congo as well as in Darfur threaten further destabilization in Africa.

The African Union has attempted to address these problems, but have failed to do so, for lack of resources and support from the international community.

"There has to be recognition that these problems are major problems that exceed the ability of African nations themselves and require a partnership with the U.S. and oth-

ers," Moose said.

He added that logistical support in transportation and communications should be provided to the African Union. "We haven't made that commitment. Nor has anyone else," he said.

However, the current approach to the war on terror may prove too difficult for the U.S. to address other conflicts around the world.

"One of the reasons that we can't be more robust in what is happening in Sudan is that we are stretched in Iraq and Afghanistan," Moose said.

The way in which the [Bush] administration has pursued this war has been incompetent, he added.

Moose does, however, credit the Bush administration's proposed initiatives to address HIV/AIDS in Africa.

"This administration was the first to make a commitment to the global fund [for AIDS]. If it had not been for that commitment there never would have been a fund," he said.

Fifteen million dollars over the course of five years has been pledged toward HIV/AIDS treatment and prevention plans in Africa and the Caribbean. "What we need to judge them on is whether they are able to sustain it and put into place the effective disbursement," he added. But implementation of the plan has drawn its share of critics.

"There is a lot of conditionality on the money," such

as abstinence based sexual education, Russell said. "My contacts on the ground tell me that the money has been caught up in the bureaucracy" which has made it very difficult to reach the intended audience," he added.

Russell said the money would be best spent on building clinics and hospitals that can deliver primary services to their communities.

As it stands now, "only a fraction of it gets to the people who really need it," he said.

Yet, the only way for Africa to face its current problems is if more advanced countries extend commitments that will help promote democracy and human rights. International policymakers must take greater responsibility for creating conditions that would make African countries attractive for both trade and investment, Moose said.

Failure to do so could create a security challenge that permeates other world affairs. "If those countries are not given the resources to get out of their current state of affairs, that chaos and anarchy will serve as a breeding ground for terrorist cells and terrorist entities to set up shop," Russell said.

He added, "If the War on Terrorism is to be won, then it needs to be taken seriously" and "if it is a global effort, then Africa should be looked at just as strongly as any other region."

D'Ivoire Johnson writes for the Minnesota Spokesman-Recorder.

Ivory Coast reviews citizenship

ABIDJAN, Ivory Coast (AP) — Ivory Coast's president agreed Saturday to a constitutional review of the requirements for presidency, an issue that has split the West African nation politically.

Laurent Gbagbo will ask the National Assembly to consider dropping a constitutional requirement that any presidential candidate be born of parents who were both born in Ivory Coast, presidential spokesman Desire Tagro said.

Ivory Coast's southern-based government has used the requirement to bar a presidential run by Alassane Ouattara, claiming his parents were not born in Ivory Coast.

The issue has encapsulated the power struggle between the largely Christian ethnic groups of the long-dominant south and the largely Muslim ethnic groups of the north, as well as Ivory Coast's millions of Muslims from immigrant stock.

Ouattara is the candidate favored by many northerners.

Ivory Coast has been split into rebel-held

north and government south since a September 2002 coup attempt propelled the world's largest cocoa grower into civil war.

Neither side has fully complied with peace accords, and Gbagbo last month reopened attacks on the rebel-held north for three days, citing insurgents' failure to disarm.

Gbagbo agreed to the review of the constitution now "to facilitate disarmament, the reunification of the country and the holding of a referendum," his spokesman said.

Amending the constitution would take a national vote, if both houses of the legislature agree.

Gbagbo's agreement came during a visit by South African President Thabo Mbeki, who on Saturday urged Ivory Coast to stick to its peace accords.

Mbeki's mission was undertaken at the request of the African Union. It was part of an international diplomatic mobilization after one of Gbagbo's strikes in the north hit a French peacekeeping post, killing nine French peacekeepers and an American aid worker.



LEBRON GROUNDED

Two students walk past Nike's controversial billboard advertisement featuring NBA star LeBron James and Chinese mythological characters in Hong Kong on Tuesday. China has kicked up a stink over a Nike footwear advertisement in which U.S. basketball star LeBron James takes on and subdues a series of traditional Chinese characters ranging from a cartoon kung fu master to a couple of dragons.