

Black women: Rice's Africa visit overdue

By Naomi Abraham
Special to Sentinel-Voice
NEW YORK (WOMENS E-NEWS) - Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice visited Africa this week for the first time in her official capacity. For many African-Americans and African women, who take pride in Rice's international stature, her trip to Senegal and Sudan was too little and too long in coming, reflecting perhaps a lack of concern. Others bask in the glory of one of their own being in such a powerful position.

As the first woman of color to serve as a Secretary of State, Rice is the center of intense scrutiny and comment by Black women throughout the world.

For example, Sokari Ekine, a Nigerian blogger features a "Rice Watch" section that takes frequent pot shots at the U.S. secretary of state, depicting her as a champion of corporate interests that not only are not shared by Black women, but do them outright harm.

In Ekine's view, U.S. support of multinationals in Africa is eroding the livelihoods of many Black women. And that, she says, means that the cons of Rice's foreign policy agenda outweigh the pros of her attaining one of the highest roosts in international politics.

"The privatization of public services has, for example, already impacted on the lives of South African women who cannot afford to pay the high costs of water," she said. "This has also led to the criminalization of women as they steal water from their neighbors in a desperate attempt to maintain their dignity."

While Ekine is not alone in her views, some Black female pundits have applauded Rice for raising the international stature of Black women while keeping quiet on the Bush administration policies she represents.

One expert says that these strikingly different views reflect an ambivalence felt by many.

"As much as African-Americans want to herald the appointment of our first Black woman to ascend to the position of U.S. Secretary of State, Dr. Rice's world view, policies and priorities are contrary to the interests of African descended people around the planet," said Ramona Edelin, a scholar and treasurer of the Black Leadership Forum in Washington, D.C., in an interview



U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice visited folks in the Abu Shouk camp for displaced people in el-Fasher, capital of the North Darfur state during her recent tour of Africa.

with National Public Radio.

Until recently, when the Secretary of State traveled to Dakar, Senegal, to attend a conference of Washington's African Growth and Opportunity Act — where she stressed a commitment to U.S. and African trade — Rice had not visited the region in her new official capacity. Her visit follows First Lady Laura Bush's week long trip to Africa.

Rice flew to Sudan, where she visited a refugee camp in conflict-ridden Darfur region and spoke privately to women affected by ongoing sexual violence.

Rice reaffirmed the U.S. position on Darfur saying, "The United States believes that by our accounts it was and is genocide."

Some Black women felt Rice should have made the trip sooner, in light of this year's focus on Africa at the recent summit of the Group of 8 — the annual meeting of the most heavily developed industrialized nations. In addition, the international concerns about the genocide in Darfur and the ongoing war in the Democratic Republic of the Congo also seemed to call for a visit from Rice.

"It is disturbing that Rice is just visiting Africa especially considering the theme of this year's G-8 summit," says Basse Ikpí, a Nigerian-born writer living in New York City.

Rice cut her trip short to go to Israel and the West Bank to demonstrate U.S. concern about the recent rise of violence in the area, a move some saw as an error.

"This sends a clear signal that the Middle East is more important in her eyes, and Africa — the land of her own

ancestors — is at the very bottom of the U.S. foreign policy agenda," said Salih Booker, executive director of Africa Action, a Washington-based group.

Aissato Bey has a very different view.

Like many, the longtime community activist in New York believes Rice's accomplishments are "admirable." She adds, "She is what White people think we should be." However, even though, she is "not okay with her having done very little for the betterment of the community," she sees nothing to gain in singling out Rice for attack.

"Airing our dirty laundry is not our way. The media is already saturated with negative images of us so why should we give them more reason to distort our image."

Going one step further is Dorothy Height. The chair and president emerita of the National Council of Negro Women is notable for her outspoken praise of Rice. The organization with an outreach to nearly 4 million women has worked with African women and has offices in Dakar.

"Our nation will finally put forward a face that reflects the hopes of generations of Black women, to sit at the table on national and global affairs and participate as equals," she wrote in the *Washington Post*.

Height noted that Rice had many global priorities to balance in her official role.

When asked whether Rice should have made a visit to the continent earlier, or if she was wrong to cut the trip short, Height says, "We have to bear in mind that a lot is happening in the world — Iraq, the war on terrorism. Her choices may not neces-

sarily reflect her wishes but reality."

Mentions of Rice are rare on Black media outlets or websites of Black women's organizations — such as the National Coalition of 100 Black Women or Black Career Women. An ingredient of this reticence is an often open distrust of Bush administration policies in Africa, say critics. Bush's public promises at this month's G-

8 summit are a recent example.

The president pledged \$1.2 billion to help in the reduction of malaria deaths and \$55 million to improve legal protections for African women affected by sexual violence. Bush also proposed doubling the amount of U.S. aid to \$400 million for the education of African girls.

Ann-Louise Colgan, director of policy analysis and communications at Africa Action, was quick to note that funding had not been guaranteed for the commitments and that only a handful of countries would benefit from these initiatives.

"The Bush Administration's Africa policy is more noteworthy for its public relations efforts than for any benefit to the African continent," Colgan said in a statement following Bush's aid pledge.

Many Black women also said Rice was missing the chance to use her identity as a powerful Black woman to benefit Black girls.

"If she identified as a Black woman she would send a powerful message to young and Black girls of success and triumph," says Ikpi,

the Nigerian-born writer. "I am impressed with her success and that she has beaten all odds to get to where she is," she said. But, she adds, Rice should make being a Black woman part of her public persona, demonstrating she has not forgotten "those left behind."

For all of this, however, few Black women wish to criticize Rice openly — either for her approach to Africa or anything else — saying there is no set of ideas or positions to which Rice, just because she is a Black woman, should be expected to hold.

"We are a diverse group of people, so why must we tell the same story over and over again?" says Bey, the community activist.

Darlene Young, president of Blacks in Government, a Washington-based advocacy group for Black civil servants, agrees.

"Rice has enhanced our image," said Young. "Non-Blacks now recognize that we are a diverse group of people capable of being at the level of intelligence and power that Dr. Rice has."

Naomi Abraham writes for Women's e-News.

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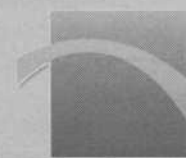
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