

9/7

Bradenton, FL.

Dear C-SPAN-

For over a year you have spared us commentary on the African scene by Randall Robinson, and I had assumed that you had finally seen through this fraud. But there he was again sounding off on Somalia. This is my FIFTH protest against the one-sided Trans-Africa version of African realities, and the enclosed articles make it clear that I am hardly alone in my criticism of that organization and what passes for Black leadership in this country. Similar comments have also recently been published in "The Times Literary Supplement" and "The New African."

Rep. Payne's suggestion to disarm all military units in Zaïre, a country four times the size of France, makes it clear that he continues to be one of the Hill's least enlightened thinkers, and a walking advertisement for term limits - one to be exact.

Sincerely,



Tough love

In January 1992, before the suffering in Somalia became front-page news, Representative Alan Wheat, a member of the Congressional Black Caucus and the House select committee on hunger, asked the Bush administration to consider armed intervention. Administration officials told him the idea was ridiculous. Among other reasons, Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs Herman Cohen argued that Wheat's colleagues on the CBC wouldn't support such a move. After all, the Caucus had opposed military action in Grenada, Panama, Libya and Iraq.

Cohen was wrong. The CBC not only endorsed Wheat's proposal but actually applauded Bush's December decision to send troops. It called for the United States to disarm the warlords months before the recent raids against General Mohamed Farah Aideed.

The CBC's position on Somalia represents a major shift in the group's relationship with black African nations. After years of willful naïveté, African-American policy-makers are no longer afraid to point out the political and moral deficiencies of African leaders. A congressional staffer notes that when he attended Howard University a few years ago, "You would have been labeled a CIA [agent] if you criticized human rights abuses in Africa; now you see a different approach." Indeed, CBC member Alcee Hastings concedes, "Some of us are more critical than we once were."

Until recently, most black congressional leaders reserved their moral outrage for white-ruled South Africa and Rhodesia. In 1977 Representative Charles Diggs, chairman of the House subcommittee on Africa, refused to condemn Uganda's Idi Amin because of his "concern that a congressional investigation might divert public attention from human rights conditions in South Africa." A year later one of Diggs's aides, Randall Robinson, formed TransAfrica, the first African-American foreign policy lobbying organization. TransAfrica skillfully mobilized African Americans against apartheid but never aroused similar passion about rights abuses elsewhere. They should have been called TransSoweto. They did nothing about African problems except in South

Africa," says Remigius Kintu, president of the anti-government Ugandan Democratic Coalition.

Because South Africa dominated its efforts, TransAfrica embraced black oppressors who contributed to the anti-apartheid struggle. Zambia's Kenneth Kaunda, a close ally of Saddam Hussein's, served as honorary chairman of Africare, a prominent African-American development group, and TransAfrica featured Kaunda's ambassadors at fund-raisers. Robinson maintained that Tanzania's one-party government deserved U.S. aid because of its role as "a leader of the front-line states [against apartheid] and as an important voice in the non-aligned and Third Worlds."

In August 1983, during the Ethiopian famine, TransAfrica harshly criticized the Reagan administration for its slow humanitarian response, dismissing State Department charges that Ethiopia was diverting food aid to its military. TransAfrica waited until 1988 to advocate sanctions against Mengistu Haile Meriam's brutal regime. Even then, Representative Mickey Leland publicly contradicted the group, maintaining that the West did not understand Mengistu. C. Payne Lucas, Africare's president, says that "ten years ago, I wouldn't have been criticizing [African countries]."

But by the late 1980s, F.W. de Klerk's reforms, which culminated in the release of Nelson Mandela and the legalization of the African National Congress, left TransAfrica without a mission. Apartheid's demise alone wasn't enough to bring African-American leaders to focus on human rights abuses in the rest of the continent, however. Something else prompted the change. With the end of Soviet aid, the leftist autocracies that TransAfrica esteemed for their anti-apartheid, non-aligned credentials either embraced multiparty democracy and the free market, as was the case in Angola, Mozambique and Tanzania, or lost power to those who did, as in Benin, Congo, Ethiopia and Zambia.

Governments that remained conspicuously undemocratic, such as those in Zaire, Kenya and Malawi, were pro-Western, with questionable anti-apartheid credentials. Zaire's Mobutu Sese Seko had long collaborated with South Africa in assisting Angolan rebel Jonas Savimbi; Malawi's Hastings Kamuzu Banda had been the only African leader to maintain full diplomatic relations with the South

African government. These men were already unpopular in non-aligned circles, and opposing them represented a relatively safe extension of the anti-apartheid movement. In response to Ghanaian economist George Ayittey's charge that African-American leaders "only attack regimes that are pro-West," Adwoa Dunn-Mouton, Senator Paul Simon's chief aide for Africa policy, says, "That's where all the dictators are."

African exiles proved the final factor in persuading African-American politicians and lobbyists to become more critical of African human rights abuses. In 1988, as Ethiopians persuaded TransAfrica to support sanctions against Mengistu, Liberians gained the CBC's support for a reduction in aid to Samuel K. Doe. By 1991 Mengistu was in exile and Doe murdered. In July 1990 Gibson Kamau Kuria, an exiled Kenyan civil rights lawyer, marshaled Robinson, Jesse Jackson, Coretta Scott King and David Dinkins to call for the termination of U.S. aid to Kenya, a position tougher than the one favored by the Bush administration.

On Zaire, the Bush and Clinton administrations have wavered between advocating a temporary power-sharing arrangement between Mobutu and former Prime Minister Etienne Tsishekedi, and simply recognizing Tsishekedi and trying to force Mobutu out. The CBC has shown no such ambivalence. In February, Representative Donald Payne sent a letter to President Clinton calling on him to freeze Mobutu's assets in the United States, expel his ambassador and "seek U.N. approval to send a military force to disarm all military units."

Judging by this year's African-American Summit, where the NAACP awarded lifetime membership to Gabonese dictator Omar Bongo, not all African-American organizations share the CBC's human rights focus. Yet the Caucus has an ally, African exiles, for whom moral vigilance is a prerequisite for the trans-Atlantic bond that many African Americans desire. In the words of Suleiman Nyang, the Gambian chairman of Howard University's African studies department, "They must be loving critics.... If African Americans are interested only in the attention of dictators, the victims of those dictators will not respond very favorably to their efforts at solidarity."

PETER BEINART

Los Angeles Times

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Commentary

A Summit to Legitimize a Corrupt Regime?

■ **Africa:** American participants in Gabon should ask hard questions about human rights.

By **GEORGE B. N. AYITTEY**

About 600 prominent African-Americans are to gather today for the "Second African African-American Summit" in Gabon, a Central African state on the brink of bankruptcy and popular rebellion.

Two years ago, the African-American delegation to the first such summit, held in the Ivory Coast, was used as a public relations prop by authoritarian African leaders. As African-American conferees head toward Gabon, many Africans wonder whether they will again be used.

Upon formal independence from France in 1960, Gabon, the size of Connecticut, possessed the greatest economic potential in black Africa. With a small population and rich in oil and other resources, Gabon appeared destined for prosperity.

Yet today, Gabon is essentially bankrupt. Corruption and mismanagement have impoverished the people and saddled the country with the world's highest per capita indebtedness. Income from the 1970s oil boom disappeared into private bank accounts, profligate projects like the 1977 Organization of African Unity summit and President Omar Bongo's \$139-million palace in Libreville.

In mid-April, Gabonese took to the streets, demanding restoration of water and electricity, which had been shut off for about six months as the bankrupt country's infrastructure crumbled. Bongo's presidential guard brutally suppressed the demonstrations, killing several people.

Bongo will seek a fifth seven-year term



Associated Press

Gabon President Omar Bongo.

in Gabon's first multiparty presidential election in December. What better opportunity to burnish his image than the summit? The U.S. delegation reads like a "Who's Who" of African-Americans. Organizers say it will include Virginia Gov. Douglas Wilder, Commerce Secretary Ron Brown, the Rev. Jesse Jackson, Coretta Scott King and Joseph Lowery.

The summit's emphasis is on building business links with Africa. Unfortunately, these have served mostly to bolster corrupt leaders across Africa. African-Americans would best help their black brothers and sisters by pressing the transcendent issues of freedom and open government.

An opportunity for African-Americans to promote African democratization was squandered two years ago when Ivory Coast President Felix Houphouet-Boigny hosted the "First African African-American Summit." Participants gathered at the president's home town of Yamassoukrou, site of the world's largest Catholic basilica—erected at a cost of at least \$360 million, in a country with an average annual per capita income of only \$1,381.

The African-Americans in Yamassoukrou had nothing but praise for the African leaders who came for feasts and photo opportunities. There wasn't a word about the murder of more than 80 pro-democracy demonstrators the week before in neighboring Mali, or a murmur about the 26 missing pro-democracy demonstrators just dredged from the Lome Lagoon in nearby Togo. One of the corpses was a woman with her baby still strapped to her back.

Benjamin Hooks, then-director of the NAACP, was quoted at the time as saying, "There is little black Americans could or should do directly to foster or affect political change in sub-Saharan Africa . . . I don't think it is our business to meddle in their affairs."

As delegates were being guided through Yamassoukrou, a citizen asked: "Why have you black Americans let us down?"

African-Americans in Gabon should ponder this. They ought not to allow themselves to be used by Bongo. At this summit, they should instead reinforce the democratic values that most Africans hold as America's most admirable quality.

George B. N. Ayittey, a native of Ghana, is associate professor of economics at American University in Washington. He is the author of "Africa Betrayed" (St. Martin's Press, 1992).

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OPINION

Just Who Are These Visitors Helping?

WASHINGTON — Political surrealism reached new peaks this week as hundreds of African-Americans gathered for a second African-American Summit in Gabon, a Central African state on the brink of bankruptcy and popular rebellion.

As students marched in the streets to protest the collapsing infrastructure, the foreign minister — the daughter of President Omar Bongo — offered groggy new arrivals a fashion show including a half-dozen European models especially flown in for the event, strutting the latest creations to the accompaniment of Michael Jackson CDs.

In 1991, authoritarian African leaders used the African-American delegation to the first such conference, in the Ivory Coast, as a public relations prop. Many African-American conferees wonder whether that is happening again in Gabon.

Upon formal independence from France in 1960, Gabon possessed the greatest economic potential in black Africa. With a small population and abundant natural resources, it appeared destined for prosperity. Yet today Gabon is essentially bankrupt.

Corruption and mismanagement have impoverished the people and saddled the country with the world's highest per capita indebtedness. Income from the 1970s oil boom disappeared into private bank accounts, profligate projects like the 1977 Organization of African Unity summit and President Bongo's \$139 million palace in Libreville.

In mid-April, Gabonese took to the streets, demanding restoration of water and electricity, which had been cut off for about six months as the country's infrastructure crumbled.

By George B. N. Ayittey

Mr. Bongo's presidential guard brutally suppressed the demonstrations, killing several people.

In December, Mr. Bongo will seek a fifth seven-year term in the country's first multiparty presidential election. What better opportunity to burnish his image than the "summit"?

While the U.S. commerce secretary, Ron Brown, and most U.S. congressmen prudently avoided the potential trap, American organizers attracted some prominent U.S. delegates by arguing that the aim was to increase cooperation between the United States and Africa's developing countries. Those attending include Jesse Jackson, Louis Farrakhan, Andrew Young, Coretta Scott King, Louis Sullivan, Governor Douglas Wilder of Virginia and Representative John Conyers Jr. of Michigan.

The meeting's emphasis is on building business links with Africa. Unfortunately, these have served mostly to bolster corrupt leaders across Africa. African-Americans could best help their black brothers and sisters by pressing the transcendent issues of freedom and open government.

An opportunity for African-Americans to promote democratization was squandered two years ago when President Félix Houphouët-Boigny of the Ivory Coast hosted the first African-American Summit. Participants gathered at the president's hometown of Yamoussoukro, site of the world's largest Roman Catholic basilica — erected at a cost of at least \$360 million, in a country in which annual per capita income is \$1,381.

The African-Americans in Yamous-

soukro had only praise for the African leaders who came for feasts and photo opportunities. There was not a word about the murder of more than 80 pro-democracy demonstrators the week before in neighboring Mali, nor a murmur about the 26 missing pro-democracy demonstrators who had been found at the bottom of Lomé lagoon in nearby Togo. One of the corpses was that of a woman with her baby still strapped to her back.

Benjamin Hooks, then director of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, was quoted as saying: "There is little black Americans could or should do directly to foster or affect political change in sub-Saharan Africa ... I don't think it is our business to meddle in their affairs."

As delegates were being guided through Yamoussoukro, a citizen asked: "Why have you black Americans let us down?"

African-Americans in Gabon should ponder this. They ought not to allow themselves to be used by President Bongo. At this meeting they should instead reinforce the democratic values that most Africans hold as America's most admirable quality.

Early reports from the meeting have not been encouraging. Not a single delegate attended a public meeting called by Gabonese human rights groups and opposition political parties to protest human rights abuses in a country claiming to be a model for the continent's democratic future.

The writer, a native of Ghana, is associate professor of economics at American University and author of "Africa Betrayed." He contributed this comment to the Herald Tribune.