

George Bush Visits Africa to Promote the US Africa Command

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Horace Campbell looks at Bush's visit as an attempt to further militarize the continent and consolidate US holding.

One year after the announcement that the United States government was going to accelerate the militarization of Africa, President George Bush is embarking on a journey to Africa to coerce African societies to align themselves with the neo-conservative agenda of the present US administration. President George Bush will visit five African countries between February 15 -21. The countries are Benin, Ghana, Liberia, Rwanda and Tanzania. George Bush is a lame-duck President who cannot visit real global players so this visit to Africa is an effort to shore up the credentials of the neo-liberal forces in Africa while promoting the conservative ideas of abstinence as the basis of the fight against the HIV/AIDS pandemic.

Exactly one year ago, in February 2007, President Bush of the United States of America announced that the Defense Department would create a new Africa Command to coordinate U.S. government interests on the continent. Under this plan all governmental agencies of the US would fall under the military, i.e, USAID, State Department, US Department of Energy, Treasury, and Department of Education etc. Already within the US academic community, the interests of the Pentagon has been placed before all other interests.

In pursuance of the plans for the militarization of Africa, the US Department of Defense announced the appointment of General William "Kip" Ward (an African American) as Head of this new Military command. On September 28, 2007, Ward was confirmed as the head of this new imperial military structure and on October 1 2007, the new command was launched in Stuttgart, Germany. The major question that is being posed by African peace activists and by concerned citizens is, why now? Why is a lame duck President seeking to gain more support in Africa?

One answer may lay in the diminished power of the United States in the aftermath of the Fiasco in Iraq and Afghanistan. I will maintain in this reflection that it is urgent that peace activists who want reconstruction and transformation in Africa oppose the plans for the remilitarization of Africa under the guise of fighting terrorism in Africa.

Why Now?

At the end of World War II the United States had emerged as a leading political, economic and military force in world politics. It was in this period when the US established unified military command structures such as the European Command, the Pacific Command, the Southern Command, the Northern Command, and Central Command. Each command covers

an area of responsibility (AOR). When this command structure was being refined, Africa was an after thought in so far as the United States had relegated the exploitation of Africa to the former European colonial exploiters. Hence, Africa fell under the European Command with its headquarters in Germany. Africa had not been included in the geographic combatant commands in so far as it was expected that France, Britain, Belgium, Germany, Spain, Portugal and other colonial powers would retain military forces to guarantee western 'interests' in Africa. The collapse of the Portuguese colonial forces in Mozambique, Angola, Guinea and Sao Tome and the collapse of the white racist military forces in Rhodesia gradually led to a rethinking by the US military. During this period the US had labeled all African freedom fighters as terrorists. When the US was allied with Osama Bin Laden and Jonas Savimbi, Nelson Mandela had been branded a terrorist.

Central Command

After the Iranian revolution in 1978-1979, the US established the Central Command. CENTCOM based in Florida, USA was responsible for the US military activities in East Africa and the Horn of Africa (Djibouti, Egypt, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya, Seychelles, Somalia and the Sudan). The Pacific Command based in Hawaii was responsible for the Comoros, Diego Garcia, Madagascar and Mauritius. Added to these commands in six continents are the logistical command structures such as the Joint Forces Command (JFCOM), Space Command (SPACECOM), the Strategic Command (STRATCOM), the Special Operations Command (SOCOM) and the Transport Command (TRANSCOM).

At the end of the era of formal apartheid, the US military had established the Africa Crisis Response Initiative (ACRI) with the goal of supporting humanitarianism and ending genocide. It was this same US government that had lobbied the United Nations to withdraw troops from Rwanda in the midst of the fastest genocide in Africa. Two years later, the US supported the militarist forces in Burundi even while publicly renouncing the genocidal violence and the war in Burundi.

Throughout this period, the US military had been cautious about involvement in Africa in the aftermath of the experience in Mogadishu/Somalia in 1993. This caution changed after the events of September 2001. In the next year the USA updated its ACRI "plans" to organize the African Contingency Operations Training Assistance (ACOTA). Under ACOTA, African troops were supposed to be provided with offensive military weaponry, including rifles, machine guns, and mortars. The Africa Regional Peacekeeping Program (ARP) was also established in order to equip, train, and support troops from selected African countries that are involved in "peacekeeping" operations. Additionally, the US government launched a Pan Sahel anti-terrorism initiative (later called Trans Sahara Counter Terror Initiative). Behind these grand mutations lay one clear fact. The USA wanted to control the oil resources from Africa. Presently Africa supplies more petroleum to the USA than the Middle East and US corporations wanted the US military to guarantee the dominance of US oil conglomerates.

Exposing US militarism and the failures in the Middle East

After launching two major wars from the United States Central Command, the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq pointed to the reality that high technology weapons cannot guarantee military superiority in battles. It was in the face of the quagmire that the US faced in Iraq when the United States government announced the formation of a new command structure called, Africom.

What did we learn from the visit of George Bush to the Middle East in January 2008? Even the friends and allies of the USA (such as the leadership of Saudi Arabia and Egypt) warned that the US could not get anywhere as long as the issue of the Israeli occupation of Palestine does not end. And, lo and behold, the people of Gaza took matters in their hands a few days after the visit of Bush to Egypt to bring home to the world the reality that there can be no peace in Palestine when there is illegal Israeli occupation of Palestinian lands along with the expansion of Jewish settlements in Palestine. By breaking out of the blockade of Israel and breaking through the walls that divided Gaza from Egypt. The citizens of Gaza were literally breaking the silence in the international community over the crimes against the peoples of Palestine. In the process these citizens placed the Egyptian leadership on the defensive and clarified the true alliance between Israel, Egypt and the United States. In the face of the protracted struggles of the Palestinian peoples, the future of US domination in the Middle East remains unclear, hence the political leadership in the USA is seeking new bases of support in Africa to base US troops and to strengthen the US oil corporations. In other parts of North Africa there are leaders who proclaim support for the rights of the self determination of the peoples of Palestine yet, covertly and overtly work with the government of the USA.

The governments of Morocco and Algeria, in particular, stand out as military allies of the USA while posturing that they oppose Israeli occupation. The government of Algeria is an accomplice in fabricating terrorism in the Sahel in order to justify its military alliance with the USA. Similarly, the government of Libya projects itself as a progressive government but is seeking to ingratiate itself with the neo-conservative forces in Washington. Both Algeria and Libya are important producers of petroleum and natural gas.

African Oil – The real objective

The invasion of Iraq, the instability on the border between Turkey and Iraq (with the threat of a Turkish invasion of Iraq), the stalemate over the future of Lebanon and the continued struggles for self determination in Palestine has sharpened the contradictions between imperialism and the peoples of the Middle East. In the face of this situation there are scholars who have argued and presented evidence that the government of the United States has been “fabricating terrorism” in Africa. This fabrication of terrorism carries with it racial stereotypes to support US military action in Africa. The hypocrisy of the US government in this region is manifest in the fact that while there is a major campaign against genocide and against genocidal violence in Darfur, the government of the USA cooperates with the government of the Sudan on the grounds of “intelligence sharing to fight terrorism.” It is in the Sudan where the neo- conservatives are stoking the fires of war in order to get access to the oil resources of the Sudan.

Under the guise of fighting terrorism the government of the US has been involved in many illegal activities such as kidnapping citizens in the so called extraordinary rendition.

Challenging the European Union and China in Africa

The changed realities in the Middle East and in Africa have been accompanied by a new activist posture of China in Africa. Outmaneuvered in Asia by China and challenged by the rising democratic forces in Latin America, the spaces for the accumulation of capital by US capitalists are dwindling.

In the past, when there was a crisis such as the period after the Vietnam War, the USA could

transfer the crisis to other countries via the IMF. But the European Union has challenged this calculus and created the Euro as an alternative to the US dollar. It will not be possible for the IMF to transfer the crisis to Asia, Europe, India, the Middle East or Latin America. This means that there is only one area of the world where the US imperialists will have free rein. This is in Africa. It is also in Africa where there is a movement against the economic terrorism of neo-liberalism and the unjust conditionalities of the IMF and World Bank.

African responses

Thus far the majority of African states have refused to host the Africa Command. Despite the aggressive military and diplomatic efforts by the US government, not even the closest “partners” of the imperialists have supported this call for the Africa Command. There is only one state (Liberia) that has openly called for the basing of the US Africa command on African soil. Though the United States has 5,458 “distinct and discreet military installations around the world there are pressures from the military-industrial and oil complex for the USA to have more effective resources in Africa to defend US capitalism.

For the past twenty years the US government had been building political assets in Kenya to pave the way for ‘security cooperation.” Kenya would have been one of the stops on this visit but the political struggles in Kenya made it impossible for George Bush to visit Kenya. It is this country that has participated in the so called extra-ordinary rendition. More than 90 persons were captured with apparent U.S. involvement after they fled fighting in Somalia. The prisoners were rendered on a plane chartered by the Kenyan government into secret detention in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.

Uganda would have been another stop on the visit, but the continued war in the North and the clear dictatorial character of the Museveni government made this stop undesirable.

One other undesirable ally is Ethiopia. The government of Meles Zenawi has joined in the efforts to fabricate terrorism in Somalia and has invaded Somalia. Yet, despite this alliance, Bush and the planners in Washington did not deem it safe for Bush to visit Ethiopia. Bush could not go to South Africa at this time because Jacob Zuma is the President of the ANC. He could not go to Nigeria because the Nigerians are opposed to the so called war on terror. So Bush had to find a country where he could go to. The US settled on Tanzania and Rwanda.

In West Africa, the US President is going to Benin, Liberia and Ghana. It will be the task of the political activists and democratic forces in these societies to demonstrate against the US and the plans for Africom in West Africa.

Peace loving citizens must oppose the militarization of Africa.

In 1980 when the US Central Command was being debated the citizens of the Middle East and North Africa did not sufficiently engage the full meaning of this new military structure. After the militarization of the Middle East, five major wars and millions dead, it is urgent that peace activists oppose the plans to bring Africa closer into this arc of warfare.

The quest for peace in Africa has been sharpened by the crude materialism of the present period and the intensified exploitation of Africans in the era of plunder and looting. Contemporary looting is hidden behind the discourses of liberalization, privatization, the freedom of markets and the Global war on terror. Racist images of war and “anarchy” and “failed states” are mobilized by the international media to justify the launch of the US

military command structure for Africa. Those who support real cooperation, solidarity and anti racism must oppose the US Africa command.

We should remember the statement of the columnist of the New York Times, Thomas Friedman who had written,

‘The hidden hand of the market will never work without the hidden fist – McDonald’s cannot flourish without McDonnell Douglas, the designer of the F-15. And the hidden fist that keeps the world safe for Silicon Valley’s technologies is called the United States Army, Air Force, Navy and Marine Corps.’ [1]

[1] Thomas Friedman, ‘A Manifesto for the Fast World’, New York Times Magazine, March, 1989.

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