

A new 'scramble' for Africa

By Ashfak Bokhari

A SECTION of the western media and intelligentsia has, of late, become quite outspoken in suggesting that the only answer to Africa's current problems is reimposing colonialism, whatever its hue, on the ill-fated continent. The received wisdom is that since capitalism's every bright idea has failed to lift Africa out of the morass of senseless violence, brutal wars and inhumanity, the only option left before the international community is to put the clock of history back.

The Economist of London in a recent editorial asked: "Does Africa have some inherent character flaw that keeps it backward and incapable of development?" In other words, the fault lies with the Africans themselves for what is happening to their continent: the former colonial rulers cannot be blamed for this.

A well-known columnist of *The Los Angeles Times*, William Pfaff, has been surprisingly frank in advocating Africa's recolonization. In his May 25 column, also carried by *International Herald Tribune*, he says: "Since 1995, when I wrote an article in *Foreign Affairs* quarterly, I have been arguing, though expecting no positive response but wanting to open a debate, that only an internationalized version of neo-colonialism might spare Africa some of the horrors already in prospect". Sierra Leone, he says, can no longer be considered a state. It is an "object of pillage".

Only the West, Pfaff says, can rescue Africa, if at all — not the UN. The UN, he argues, has been "crippled" by lack of funds, the ineptitudes of its peace-keeping machinery, ultimately accountable to an "irresponsible" General Assembly and by the inveterate hostility from the Republican majority in the US Congress.

Saying apologetically that his was not "a call for Africa's reconquest" by the West — though it amounts to the same — William Pfaff proposes that Africa's resources — oil, diamonds, gold, bauxite etc.

recent interview, which "bears responsibility for the destruction of our societies wrought by colonialism and power plays during the cold war."

One may recall that the Scramble for Africa, a term used to describe the division of Africa by European colonial powers, took place during the 1880s and 1890s. It began with the British intervention in Egypt after a nationalist revolt, ending up with effective British authority there. France strongly objected to this development. But as one power established formal control in a territory, the others felt impelled to follow suit, to prevent any loss of their own power.

The Berlin Conference of 1884-1885, called to deal with the future of the Congo, laid the foundations for the orderly division of Africa by European powers. The French drove east from Senegal, and expanded northward from the Congo. Great Britain moved inwards from its coastal settlements: protectorates were established in Kenya and Uganda; Cecil Rhodes pushed northward from the Cape provinces in the mid-1880s. Germany, between 1883 and 1885, gained control of German East Africa, German South West Africa, Togoland (modern Ghana and Togo), and Cameroon. By 1900 only Liberia and Ethiopia were still independent. The main players, Great Britain, Germany, France, Belgium, and Portugal had carved up Africa among them.

Now, the U.S. leads the new scramble. Despite a major setback it suffered when it intervened in Somalia, it continues its drive to control Africa but without military presence. Since all of the present conflicts in Africa are related, one way or the other, to mineral resources, especially diamonds and oil, the US has shifted its approach towards Angola because of its oil wealth — 75 per cent of its oil goes to the US.

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monds, gold, bauxite, etc. — be marketed under “new institutions of international control”. He does not elaborate.

R.W. Johnson, author of a recent work on post-liberation South Africa, says in an article in *Telegraph* that in Africa “the world has three choices: to put in place a longtime UN mandate system — in effect recolonizing the place; to allow the private companies to do the same; or to walk away.” He adds, “in much of Africa local people regard it as uncontroversially true that things were better under colonialism.”

It is interesting to recall here the proposal by a scholar of London Institute of Economic Affairs made in 1996 and aimed at bringing good governance to Africa. Robert Wheelan, writing in the institute’s journal, constructed an imperialist fantasy: “My proposal is to sell off whole countries.” The multinationals, he said, should be invited to “bid for the right to run African countries under 21-year lease,” extracting taxes in return for bringing efficiency and discipline to “an otherwise spendthrift and wayward continent.” The foreign aid, he said, is of no use and has only created wealthy dictators. Wheelan said, “If they can’t govern, we should. And who better to do it than the managers of the world’s TNCs.”

One can almost hear Cecil Rhodes bidding from his grave: two billions for southern Africa. But Rhodes would be disappointed. Botswana is already largely controlled by De Beers, which has monopoly in diamonds trade, and it is unlikely that Shell (turnover larger than many sub-Saharan countries) would surrender its effective lease of Ogoniland in Nigeria.

However, there is no gainsaying the fact that Africa’s descent to barbarism has reached horrifying levels and common man’s fate is now worse than what it was during colonialism. In Sierra Leone, the rebel leader Foday Sankoh is doing what Laurent Kabila did in Congo: amputating the hands to punish the recalcitrants, there has been a senseless war between Eritrea and Ethiopia, AIDS pandemic is ravaging the entire continent and all this coming after unprecedented massacre in Rwanda and civil war in Somalia.

Nigeria’s Nobel Prize winner Wole Soyinka says, “a wave of anomie, even a breakdown of humanity, is sweeping across the continent... it is the power syndrome that is destroying Africa, country by country.” But it is Europe, Soyinka argues in a

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weapons of indirect conquest are foreign aid, investment, multinationals, IMF, World Bank and WTO. The US operates through regimes such as Museveni in Uganda and Obasanjo in Nigeria.

But Britain, to the surprise of the US, has taken the lead in physical intervention. It moved its troops and then ‘advisers’ to Sierra Leone, in May this year, to consolidate its control over that country, and then, from there, reach out to the rest of Africa. The *Guardian*, on May 19, headlined its report on the British move: “Whitehall launches second colonization.” It said, “months before this crisis, a quieter British invasion was underway. There is barely a government ministry in the African country that does not have some Whitehall bureaucrat checking the books and offering what is euphemistically called ‘advice.’” It quotes a British officer saying, “I wouldn’t say we are running the country but it is fair to say that it is better run because we are here.”

The commander of Britain’s forces in Sierra Leone, Brig. David Richards, was quoted by *Daily Telegraph* as saying, “I am constantly surprised by the number of people who come to me and plead that Britain should recolonize Sierra Leone.” After Sierra Leone, it will be Nigeria or Kenya the next target.

When post-war independence came to Africa in 1950s and 1960s, the old borders of the “free” countries, it is interesting to note, corresponded neither to natural boundaries, nor not the homelands of linguistic or ethnic groups. Africa was divided into more than sixty separate states, none of them strong enough to compete on the world market. The European powers continued to draw the wealth out of Africa while paying less and less in return. The multinational corporations, the latter-day colonialists, now control about 80 per cent of Africa’s trade in the mineral and agricultural raw materials. ■