

# Bush's African safari

Africa.

By Maqbool Ahmad Bhatty

AT A time when thoughts of re-election must be uppermost in his mind, President George W. Bush has started a journey to Africa that would not have been considered a high priority destination for the president a few months ago.

Many US analysts have been somewhat puzzled at this trip and that too to a continent where problems and challenges abound. There are a number of civil wars, whose effect is compounded by leadership rivalries in many countries, while the economy of the continent is in a shambles.

But judging from his first pronouncements, one can see that this is primarily an exercise in image-building, presenting America as a world leader and offsetting the adverse global reactions to pre-emption in Iraq.

The visit, that will cover five countries (Senegal, Uganda, South Africa, Botswana and Nigeria) in five days, is also quite relevant to electioneering, given the size of the Afro-American vote in the US. In the last election, the majority of them voted for the Democrats, and Bush would like to attract as many of them as possible to the Republican camp, which has given high profile positions to such African-Americans as Secretary of State Colin Powell and National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice.

Significantly, Bush started his visit with a speech in the Goree Island, in Senegal, that was a major centre of the slave trade in the 18th and 19th centuries, with the largest proportion of the slaves going to the US. He called slavery one of history's greatest crimes against humanity, and made an

since the Act demands reciprocal concessions for US businessmen, such as lower trade barriers. Washington will have to adopt far more helpful policies towards the least developed countries and write off many of its debts, if it really wants to help.

Some other economic goals of a more nationalistic nature have been mentioned. President Bush and many of his close advisers have had a long association with the oil industry. With the Middle East passing through an unstable phase, the US would like to ensure the supplies of oil it is getting from Africa, especially from Nigeria, now the fourth largest supplier to the US.

President Bush has shown an inclination to play a more proactive role to end internal conflicts, such as the one that has plagued Liberia, a country founded by freed American slaves. Some of the criticism voiced in Africa over Bush's pre-emption in Iraq might be softened if the US takes on a peace-

ing to the root causes of terrorism. A combination of poverty, the spread of AIDS and the breakdown of law and order lead to the emergence of failed states, such as Somalia, and creates conditions that become incubators of terrorism. The US faced attacks on its embassies in Nairobi and Dar-es-Salam in 1998. Kenya is again on the verge of a breakdown.

Congress appropriated \$100 million to help fight terrorism in Africa at the request of President Bush, but this is an insignificant amount, given the needs and problems of the vast continent. The large amounts President Bush is committing to fight poverty and disease need to be followed up by international efforts to build up the infrastructure in Africa.

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Informed commentators have taken note of some ideological differences, which have traditionally figured in the interaction between the Republican leadership in the US and some segments of opinion in Africa. With Communist groups assuming a leadership role in several emerging states, the US Republican leadership played a prominent role in backing anti-Communist groups, such as UNITA in Angola. In the post-cold-war world, perhaps it is time for policy makers in the US to adjust their sights to the new African realities.

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humanity, and made an impassioned plea to safeguard democracy and human rights.

The US President has come to Africa armed with an impressive array of programmes to fight poverty and disease. There is the \$10 billion Millennium Challenge Account to be spent over three years to alleviate poverty. The president also announced a programme to spend \$15 billion over the next five years to fight HIV/AIDS that is decimating the population of Africa. Congress has appropriated only one billion dollar so far but Bush has shown seriousness of intention to secure the balance.

US Congress had passed the Africa Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA) that allows duty-free import of garments from Africa. However, African exporters and policy makers do not hide their dissatisfaction with the overall US economic policies that are harmful to African interests. The most serious problem is posed by agricultural subsidies to US farmers that virtually rule out African farm exports to the US. Even the AGOA provisions have a flip side

keeping role. However, memories of the last US peacekeeping effort in Somalia are discouraging. Furthermore, with the deployment of its forces in Iraq, and Afghanistan, where they continue to face local hostility, the US is bound to be cautious and consider whether it is in a position to increase its international commitment on this score.

President Bush may encourage regional African involvement in peacekeeping that has been in evidence in Sierra Leone and even Liberia. He also mentioned the desirability of a UN role. His discussions with the leaders of the two key African states, South Africa and Nigeria, would be extremely important in this context. Indeed, the prospects of future stability in the continent would depend largely on a South Africa-Nigeria axis since these two are the largest and richest of the African states.

This does not mean, however, that terrorism, as the leading global issue of the day will take a back seat during the Bush tour of Africa. Indeed, the continent typifies the challenges pertain-

ing to the new African realities.

Similarly, in a continent where traditional tribal faiths have held sway, both Islam and Christianity have been active in seeking converts. Islam, with its stress on equality and brotherhood, has been spreading faster despite the vast resources available to Christian missionaries. Now that terrorism is being blamed mainly on Muslims, we have the makings of a local clash of values and civilizations, with the US missionaries in the forefront, notably in countries such as Sudan.

President Bush's tour will be too short to influence the political, economic and social trends in Africa in a significant way. However, even keeping his priorities of helping Africa fight AIDS, terrorism and poverty and brushing his own and his country's image as the world leader in mind, one hopes that he will help encourage trends and policies that will bring hope and justice to the impoverished and neglected millions of the Dark Continent.

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