

From the cradle to the grave

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*Aajao, maine sun li teray dhol
ki tarang,
Aajao, mustt ho gayee meray
lahu ki taal,
Aajao Afreeqa
Aajao, maine dhool se maatha
uttha liya,
Aajao, maine chheel di
aankhon se gham ki chhaal,
Aajao, maine dard se bazoo
chhurra liya,
Aajao, maine noch diya bekasi
ka jaal,
Aajao Afreeqa*

WORLD VIEW

By Mahir Ali

EVER the internationalist, Faiz Ahmed Faiz paid this tribute to Africa's liberation struggles in 1955. Listen closely to his invocation and you can hear the rhythm of tribal drums, perhaps even pick up the distant echoes of freedom chants. Much of the continent was at the time under the yoke of European colonial masters, and its peoples' yearning for freedom served as an inspiration to progressive movements across the globe.

Africa today is a far cry from the hopes invested in it all those years ago. Poverty and pestilence go hand in hand through much of the continent. It's better acquainted with drought and famine than any comparable part of the world. Misgovernance is endemic, and there is an unparalleled propensity towards civil wars that tend, every now and then, to spill across borders.

All these ills keep reinforcing each other. A decade after hopes of an African renaissance were raised by the end of the cold war and by South Africa's success in throwing off, without violence, the shackles of apartheid, the cradle of humanity is beginning to resemble its grave.

How did it come to this? What went wrong?

It is easy — perhaps too easy — to blame it all on ruthless exploitation. Of course, it would be hard to deny that, on the whole, African nations were subjected to greater indignities than other western

edge moral responsibility for his assassination. The CIA, too, had Lumumba in its sights, but was pre-empted on this occasion. Within a few years the confusion in the Congo gave way to the absolutism of the appropriately pro-western but profoundly corrupt Mobutu Sese Seko.

Unlike the Congo — which was renamed Zaire before reclaiming its older nomenclature post-Mobutu — most African countries that gained independence in the early 1960s got the rulers they wanted: among others, Kwame Nkrumah in Ghana, Julius Nyerere in Tanzania, Jomo Kenyatta in Kenya, Ahmed Ben Bella in Algeria. Quite a few of them were scholars and statesmen with lofty, pan-Africanist ideals. Not all of them were inclined towards socialism, but most of them were to some degree devoted to the economic uplift of their people.

They were not entirely unsuccessful in this endeavour. Yet the absence, broadly speaking, of a manufacturing base through

towards Washington. Measures to redress this perceived imbalance included a policy of arming rival militias, a strategy that has proved even more detrimental to African prospects over the past 30 years than the IMF's structural adjustment.

American concern was reinforced in the 1970s when the demise of the fascist Salazar regime in Portugal facilitated the liberation of Mozambique, Angola and Guinea-Bissau, and in each case the triumphant freedom movements turned out to be left-leaning. The US and South Africa (which, under apartheid, played on behalf of the US a regional role comparable to that of Israel in the Middle East) for nearly two decades funnelled funds and weapons to the rebel forces of Jonas Savimbi despite their well-documented atrocities.

Savimbi was eventually forced to give up, but not until Angola had been pretty much devastated. Now American oilmen are eyeing the oil wells that were once protected by Cuban soldiers from Savimbi's hordes — and, according to some reports, US military personnel have also been spotted in Luanda. Africa is now very much a part of US plans to diversify further its energy sources. Although Angola isn't on George W. Bush's itinerary this week, the Emperor of the Free World is gracing Nigeria, Uganda, Botswana, South Africa and Senegal with his presence.

What can the world do for Africa? Quite a lot, actually. Truly free and fair trade would be a start — and not so much a favour as simply the right thing to do. One of the main reasons African farmers cannot compete with their western counterparts is the hefty agricultural subsidies, which not only mean that the European and American markets are effectively shut to them, but also enable the US to dump its agricultural surplus in Africa.

Travelling through Africa can be a mind-expanding experience. That's probably asking for too much in Bush's case. And while one would like to think that lavishing such attention on Africa makes a welcome change from past policy, the record of the present US administration impels one to fear for the nations it suddenly begins to heed. Likewise, regime change in Liberia and the possible deployment there of peacekeepers, including a contingent from the US, may make sense in the short term. It's worth noting, though, that militias in many parts of Africa are able to readily attract recruits because there are so few alternative vacancies. Just as tribal rivalries are invariably rooted in deprivation, militias have become a sort of

ties than other western colonies. Even before the great wave of 19th century colonization, it was largely African human resources that were singled out as fodder for the slave trade.

As a crime against humanity, the enslavement of an estimated 12 million Africans between 1650 and 1850 would appear to be on a par with the Holocaust suffered by European Jews in the 20th century, but it's not a subject touched upon too often by commentators. Whenever the descendants of slaves in the US bring up the question of reparations, they attract little more than derision. Although tribal rivalries in Africa preceded colonization, they were exacerbated by the divide-and-rule strategies favoured by the European ruling elites, and the current Congolese crisis serves as a reminder of how long old wounds can fester.

The Democratic Republic of the Congo, where a seemingly endless civil war is believed to have claimed close to five million lives over the past five years, is in many ways a special case. At the handing-over ceremony following independence in 1961, King Baudouin read out a paternalistic speech filled with praise for Belgium's role in the region. The independent nation's young prime minister begged to differ. Patrice Lumumba was not scheduled to speak at the ceremony, but did so anyway. "We have known sarcasm and insults, endured blows morning, noon and night because we were 'niggers'," he said.

The Belgians weren't accustomed to plain-talking 'natives'. A separatist revolt was rapidly engineered, and within a year Lumumba was dead. Not until last year — 40 years after the event — did Brussels acknowl-

much of the continent posed a serious dilemma. Africa had been stripped of much of its wealth during the colonial era, but had received precious little in return. Western powers continued to be keen on access to African resources, but had little interest in helping African countries stand on their own feet.

This does not mean that economic asphyxiation was inevitable. Unfortunately, no one was able — or willing — to come up with economic models that took cognizance of specific African conditions and traditions. Models that diverged from western monetarist prescriptions as well as the socialist orthodoxy. Models that may have worked despite Africa's underdevelopment.

Meanwhile, those leaders who, against the odds, survived the first few years began devoting more and more attention to consolidation as a means of political longevity. The ambitions of the indigenous military hierarchy and external destabilization efforts, occasionally in concert, posed the biggest threat. The result, in too many cases, was a drift towards one-party rule. Staying in power became an end in itself and gained precedence over other goals, such as basic economic development and progress towards democratic institutions. Zimbabwe's Robert Mugabe offers a textbook late-20th-century example.

These phenomena are not, of course, exclusively African. Nor, indeed, was the manner in which superpower rivalry manifested itself in the continent. The US was more than a little alarmed when the first flush of independence led to the emergence of nations likely to be friendlier towards Moscow or Beijing (not to mention Havana) than

tias have become a sort of business.

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It would also help if the rich nations would respond more readily to UN aid appeals for Africa's poorest countries, thereby helping save tens of thousands of lives. Aid dependence isn't good for Africa, and handouts are obviously no substitute for the sort of investment that could help establish a manufacturing base. But staving off starvation is a worthy short-term goal. At the same time, although there has been much talk of western pharmaceutical giants abjuring the profit motive to make medicines — particularly AIDS remedies — readily and cheaply available to Africans, it hasn't happened yet on a sufficiently large scale.

Beyond that, rescuing Africa from the grave is up to Africans. In a political testament written shortly before he was killed, Patrice Lumumba said: "One day, history will have its say, but it will not be the history they teach at the UN, in Washington, Paris or Brussels but the history they teach in countries freed from colonialism and its puppets. Africa will write its own history and it will be one of glory and dignity."

His prediction may yet be fulfilled. Perhaps Africa can still "come back". Perhaps...

E-mail: mahirali@journalist.com