

The shaming tragedy of Africa

By

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It is the continent with 12 per cent of the world's population but with 80 per cent of the world's AIDS deaths. It has experienced 30 years of economic stagnation. Its murderous wars and genocides seem never-ending; on average, 200,000 die every year. Unemployment varies between 30 and 70 per cent. Its corruption is endemic. It is Africa.

The latest African horrors to disfigure our screens come from Congo's Bunia. Lendus kill Hemas who now kill Lendus in a cycle of tribal murder. James Astill's chilling film on Friday's Newsnight showed streets dotted with corpses surveyed by a powerless garrison of UN peacekeepers 'without the mandate' to intervene; a 10-year-old orphan in combat fatigues told Astill, in one of this year's more extraordinary TV interviews, he had killed 10 Lendus himself.

Half of Africa's 10-year-olds do not attend primary school because there aren't any. This child militiaman, too, is uneducated and doesn't attend school; his family has been lost through Aids or war. He simply joins his peers in a disintegrating society in which plunder and murder are a way of life - and so passes the destructive gene on to the next generation.

The Democratic Republic of Congo, for long ruled by the singularly corrupt Mobutu, whose principal advantage to his American backers was that he was not a communist, is a notorious basket-case. But you do not have to look far for others. Zimbabwe is correctly stigmatised internationally. Nigeria is hardly an advertisement for anything. Islamic Africa is a double whammy - the problems of the rest of the continent overlaid by the medieval church and political structures together with religious text-based law and pre-modern prejudices which Islam entrenches.

There are a couple of brighter stories to relieve the gloom; Botswana is prospering on the back of the diamond industry, while Uganda is educating nearly all its children of primary school age. But in the main, this is a continent which year by year outdoes itself in its capacity to disappoint and inflict suffering.

Its problems involve such a matrix of homegrown economic, cultural, political and social crises, entwined with Africa's unhappy place in the international trading and financial system, that it is hard to achieve a consensus about where to begin reform, let alone build a coalition to achieve it.

But outsiders can do three things: we can be generous with aid and debt relief; we can insist that it is contingent on less corruption, better governance and more rational priorities for government spending; and we can try to ensure that we don't dump our exports on Africa and that it, in turn, has free access to our markets in the West.

These measures alone won't solve the continent's problems, which require leadership and transforming reform from within, but they would be sensible starting places.

The trouble is that the West cannot agree even on such basics. All the signs are that next week's summit of G8 leaders in France's Evian will be - from Africa's perspective - another waste of space. There is a plan tabled by the French government after February's summit of African heads of state in Paris for both the EU and US to stop dumping agricultural exports, notably European sugar and dairy products and American cotton, on Africa.

The trouble is twofold. First, the proposal comes from France, and George Bush has instructed his staff that he will not receive phone calls from President Chirac. Second, the US does not accept that its subsidies to its farmers lead to any American export dumping; its \$20 billion of support for its farmers is virtuous while similar sums spent by Europeans are dastardly.

Instead, President Bush has accused Europe of impoverishing Africa through its unwillingness to import genetically modified crops grown in either Africa or the US and in not matching American efforts to combat Aids.

The EU's performance needs improving radically, and the Common Agricultural Policy needs root-and-branch reform, but Bush's remarks are so far removed from reality that you have to wonder if he really believes them himself. The US Administration tops up the incomes of American farmers directly, allowing them to export cotton, say, at a world market price with which Africa's small farmers cannot compete, a price which, in any case, reflects the production from America that would otherwise be uneconomic. In effect, as Kevin Watkins, Oxfam's director of research says, African farmers are competing with both the US and EU Treasuries. But the US does not even acknowledge this truth.

Its position on Aids is no less compromised, giving with one hand, through its grant programme, but taking away with the other through its rearguard action defending high Aids drug prices. The drug companies' public-health declaration, dragged out of them after losing court battles in South Africa and Brazil over their right to stop their patents being infringed over life-and-death Aids drugs, recognises that public-health needs must trump private patent rights.

The EU wants to make the World Health Organisation the custodian of the declaration and give African countries the automatic right to reproduce the drugs they need at low prices in a global multilateralist deal. The US, on the other hand, resists such autonomy; instead, it wants every country to apply to the World Trade Organisation on a drug-by-drug, case-by-case basis, so that the reaction to disease is necessarily slower, and drug prices generally higher.

Nor does the US have a clean pair of hands over trade. The EU, whatever its other failings, allows African exporters access to EU markets with either low or non-existent tariffs. The US, under its African Growth and Opportunity Act, requires that African access to American markets is reciprocated by accepting US law over all property rights, whether intellectual or commercial - Empire Lite at its most insidious.

In short, US assistance to Africa is dependent on the degree Africa builds itself around the American business model and accepts American law and cheap farm exports; everybody else had better fall in line.

You might be hoping that Tony Blair was set for some honest brokering in Evian, but on this, as elsewhere, Britain is an American satrapy and we will mimic the American position. As a result, we can expect stalemate and warm words. Africa will have to look to itself for salvation, however depressing the omens. Its governments must spend more on primary schools and public-health projects and less on white-elephant universities and hospitals.

Above all, those who hold public power in African countries need to serve their countries rather than loot them, a change in attitude that will need an African enlightenment even to begin to create the idea of the public interest, of which there is precious little sign.

Africa, tragically, is going to get a lot worse. It may be decades before it gets any better.

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