

# Perceptions and realities in US-Africa policy

By Barry M. Schutz & Paul Michael Wihbey

WESTERN and global perceptions of Africa have, regrettably, been characterised by such terms as 'basket case' and 'train wreck.' African states which had been expected to develop substantially at independence in the early 1960s, have tended to stagnate or actually decline. Today African states are embroiled in at least six or seven insurgencies. African governance has been labelled irresponsible and usually corrupt. On this basis, it is easy to fall into the category of 'Afro-pessimists' who see Africa as a hopeless case for investment.

Africa is going through a phase of nationalism and national identity similar to some European states in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. Most of Africa's wars reflect the determination of various ethnic groups to either dominate the state or to secede from it. These mixed antagonisms between ethnic and religious groups, and the intensification of nationalist identity, point to a process which many nation-states have experienced. The process is neither neat nor peaceful. Europe endured the Hundred Years War and the Thirty Years War as well as 19<sup>th</sup> century national liberation movements in Italy and Germany. Only one European country — multi-ethnic Switzerland — emerged unscathed from these conflicts. Africans may have to endure generations rather than years of these conflicts before the process reaches stasis.

Underneath the wars and the insurgencies are economies in free fall. The origins of African economic stagnation were in colonial policies and, worse yet, attempts at state control by post-independence governments. More recently African states have been hamstrung by international financial institutions such as the IMF and World Bank, which have attempted to bring bloated systems back to lean, market-centered economy. In most cases, the IMF moved too quickly and without allowing debt forgiveness in those states which were making efforts to achieve economic structural reforms. It is unreasonable to expect a country with a revenue base equivalent to a small American town to achieve economic take-off while more than 25% of its revenues are being drained by debt servicing.

There is a perception that the US has no vital interests in Africa. This ignores the reality of US dependence on imported oil. As the Persian Gulf becomes increasingly dangerous — one need only think of the recent terrorist attack on the USS Cole in Yemen — the availability of alternative, more reliable sources of oil becomes increasingly attractive. The major African supplier, Nigeria — and growing west African sources from Senegal to Angola — provides the US with alternatives to heavy dependence on the Persian Gulf and on politically

sensitive wilderness areas like Alaska. A recent unclassified US defence department conference summary declared: 'West Africa is the swing production region that allows oil companies to leverage production capability to meet the fluctuating world demands... West Africa oil is of high quality, is easily accessed offshore, and well positioned to supply the North American market. And, production in the two oil-producing states (Nigeria and Angola) is expected to double or triple in the next 5 to 10 years. Already Nigeria and Angola together provide as much oil to the US as Venezuela or Mexico, making it of strategic importance.'

Despite these trends, many policy experts, including some Africanists, deride Africa's importance to the US, arguing that African oil would be imported regardless of political conditions in host countries such as Nigeria and Angola. Such double-think confuses US policy by placing strategic importance on oil-exporting areas like the Middle East simply because they are dangerous.

Perceptions that Africa is of no strategic interest to the US are also engendered by pervasive African government corruption that reaches down to the base levels of society. South Africa's President Thabo Mbeki has called for an 'African Renaissance', that acknowledges African responsibility for African problems. The new US administration can help Mbeki achieve such a goal by framing a new strategically oriented policy that facilitates African economic and political development. Among the measures the US should consider are:

- (1) debt forgiveness; by significantly reducing financial burdens, African countries would have the ability to obtain private credit and establish a more positive climate for investor confidence leading to greater foreign investment;
- (2) establishing a US South Atlantic Command that would create a new US military command structure in the South Atlantic, confirming the US's strategic interest in west Africa as the US redraws its energy supply lines for the 21<sup>st</sup> century; and
- (3) free trade that, in accordance with US Congressional initiatives like The African Growth and Opportunity Act, strongly encourages even greater reduction of US quotas and tariffs on African goods and services.

*Barry M. Schutz, Office of Analysis for Africa, US state department; Paul Michael Wihbey, Strategic Fellow, the Institute for Advanced Strategic and Political Studies, Washington D.C. The authors' views presented here are their own and are not those of the state department or of any other US government agency.*

## Books

**ECOMOG: A SUB-REGIONAL EXPERIENCE IN CONFLICT RESOLUTION, MANAGEMENT AND PEACEKEEPING IN LIBERIA** by Lieutenant Colonel Festus B. Aboagye published by Sedco Ltd., Accra, Ghana; distributed by African Books Collective, Oxford UK; pp438; price: £18.95

THIS book represents an informed, if uneven, account of peace keeping operations in Liberia in 1997-98. According to the blurb, the author commanded Ghanbatt 13, a Ghanaian task force battalion with Ecomog. He is also a veteran of UN operations in Croatia, Kuwait, Lebanon, Sinai and Egypt.

Such field experience lends a measure of authority to chapters about the nature of the Liberian civil war, the main protagonists and the practicalities of international military intervention. The

appalling human cost and economic waste of the Liberian war is dutifully recounted, and there is also much to satisfy the military specialist, from deployment maps to profiles of the various factions and fighting methods — where the martial adage 'never underestimate your enemy' is ably demonstrated.

For example, the use by armed groups of traditional potions and charms to protect against bullets, often seen by commentators as senseless superstition, is more intelligently regarded as part of

an 'orchestration of indigenous culture for military ends'.

Militia tactics such as shooting over the shoulder in retreat and 'firing for morale' (being trigger-happy) are similarly studied for their military utility.

On a political level the writer offers some interesting ideas. He cites common challenges facing Africa's democratising states as a reason for military co-operation; and makes a shrewd analysis of the implications of the end of the Cold War.

A product of military academies in Ghana, India, Britain and the US, Aboagye seems admirably aware of the *realpolitik* driving regional and external policy on conflict prevention in Africa.