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The First Black Superpower?

Photo: Clinton and Obasanjo clasp hands during the US president's visit to Nigeria in August AP Photo/J. Scott Applewhite

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One of the world's top oil producers, Nigeria is the United States' fifth-largest supplier of black gold. US investment in the West African country stands at \$7 billion. President Clinton's August 2000 visit ratified Nigeria's strategic regional potential, but also highlighted its chief limitation: intractable economic and political problems.

Nigeria's current administration, the second time around for retired army general Olusegun Obasanjo, has been endorsed repeatedly by the West, particularly the United States. Last year Secretary of State Madeleine Albright described Nigeria as one of America's four democratic "priorities" – the other three were Colombia, Ukraine, and Indonesia.

Clinton, who deliberately excluded Nigeria from his 1998 Africa tour in a pointed snub to the dictator Sani Abacha, is the first American president to set foot on Nigerian soil since Jimmy Carter in 1978. Lauded for his interest in Africa's most populous nation (roughly 124 million people in an area about twice the size of California), Clinton has also been criticized for his refusal to forgive Nigeria's staggering debt of \$32 billion; they see his visit as nothing more than an attempt to further American access to the Niger Delta's rich oil reserves.

"The President, in terms of oil, was mostly interested in getting President Obasanjo to use his good offices among the OPEC nations," Walter Carrington, former US ambassador to Nigeria, said on a recent PBS

Newshour. "Nigeria is already itself producing at its capacity," the Harvard Du Bois Institute fellow explained, "so, it is a question of Nigeria getting other countries to produce more so that the price of oil for us here in the United States will come down."

In its 40 years of independence, Nigeria is estimated to have earned \$300 billion from exporting crude oil. Yet much of the populace remains trapped in desperate poverty, with the government's already tenuous hold over its 36 states and 300 ethnic groups being threatened by a worsening economic situation and rising ethnic tension.

Nigeria "is patently not a developing nation. It is underdeveloping. Its people are far worse off than they were 30 years ago," writes Karl Maier in his new book, *This House Has Fallen: Midnight in Nigeria*. A former Africa correspondent for *The Independent*, a London newspaper, Maier reports that at least half of Nigeria's people "live in abject poverty without access to clean water. Literacy is below that of the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Gross domestic product per person is lower than it was before the beginning of the oil boom of the 1970s. To even return to the living standards of that time, the economy will have to grow by an unlikely 5 percent per year until 2010."

In a speech televised throughout Nigeria, Clinton told Nigerians, "I'm here because your fight...for democracy and human rights, for equity and economic growth, for peace and tolerance...is America's fight and the world's fight.

"You have a choice to build a new Africa. We have a chance to build a lasting network of ties between Africa and the US," Clinton said, noting that after addressing corruption and disorder collectively, "we will be able to say loud and clear to investors all over the world, 'Come to Nigeria.' "

Many hope President Clinton's trip will succeed in bringing Nigeria – long ostracized as a dictatorship – back into the international community, and as a result help attract foreign investment. Other steps toward that goal include President Obasanjo's highly publicized anti-corruption campaign. Addressing the nation last May on the first anniversary of his taking office, he declared, "I'm aiming to put an end to corruption; there will be no sacred cows!"

Obasanjo's crackdown forced dozens of high-ranking military officials into retirement and stripped hundreds of them – including his predecessor, General Abdusalam Abubakar – of national honors. An anti-corruption panel recommended the cancellation of more than a billion dollars in contracts awarded under Abubakar, and efforts are under way to recover millions of dollars stashed away in foreign banks.

The anti-corruption bill has yet to clear parliament, though. Obasanjo opponents charge that the proposed legislation grants immunity to the sitting president, his deputy, and regional state governors. Critics point to shortages in fuel and electricity outages as evidence that inefficiency and corruption still wrack many state companies and government agencies. Yet even Obasanjo's most ardent critics concede that the leader is making an effort in the face of enormous obstacles. "It'll be a miracle to begin to see the wonders of democracy instantly, but nothing has changed after a year of democratic governance," lamented Godwin Obaseki, a Lagos-based economist who commended Obasanjo's efforts. "Interest rates have been stable, foreign exchange rates are also fairly stable, and government spending somewhat controlled."

Clinton did not agree to Obasanjo's plea for total forgiveness of Nigeria's debt burden, which Obasanjo described as "a gushing wound," but promised to discuss rescheduling the debt with the Paris Club. "Nigeria shouldn't have to choose between paying interest on debt and meeting basic human needs, especially in education and health," the US president said. Clinton also promised additional funds for education, AIDS awareness programs, and to train and equip five battalions of soldiers to aid Nigeria's peacekeeping efforts in Sierra Leone and Liberia.

Obasanjo, who in his earlier term of office launched nationalizations and other expansions of federal power, now strives to recast himself as a pro-globalization economic reformer, and to portray Nigeria internationally as a land of order and stability. So far he has succeeded in attracting the investment of such Western multinationals as the German company Siemens, and the American Enron Corp, which will build a multi-million dollar, 540-megawatt power plant to electrify Lagos.

"We're looking at projects over the next few years that will probably total well over \$2 billion of investment in Nigeria, to develop gas resources, to develop new kinds of plants and technology," says Ray Wilcox of Chevron Nigeria, while adding that his company wouldn't pursue that investment without "confidence that we'd be able to see a return on that investment."

As oil companies line up to tap Nigeria's vast reserves, critics say the oil business has a devastating negative effect, bringing with it political repression and environmental degradation.

"Oil multinational corporations start the exploitation and exploration of oil without having in mind that they actually need to protect the environment," Patterson Ogun, a Niger Delta activist, told the BBC. "So, what you actually see in the Delta is more poverty, more misery and more of an endangered ecosystem."

Dr. Mojubaolu Okome, a Nigerian professor of African Studies at Fordham University in New York, does not see much gain for Nigeria in Clinton's visit. "In the Nigerian press, policymakers say this will be tremendously beneficial to Nigeria. But Nigeria doesn't owe the US a lot of money," he says. "Flashy diplomacy doesn't amount to much."

Citing Nigeria's domestic issues, Okome criticizes Clinton's grooming of Nigeria for a leadership role in West Africa. "The US has identified certain countries in Africa – Nigeria and South Africa – as strategic partners, linchpins in their foreign policy," he says, noting that "Clinton's Press Secretary said if Nigeria falls apart, everything will fall apart in West Africa."

Insisting that "the welfare of the people" should get top priority, Okome says Nigeria ought to be focusing internally, especially on the disaffection of eastern Nigeria, the adoption in some northern states of Islamic law (sharia), and the persistent tensions between the legislature and the executive branch of government.

Mobolaji Aluko, president of the Nigerian Democratic Movement and chemical engineering professor at Howard University, was also disappointed in Clinton's visit. "We are happy that President [Clinton] has gone to Nigeria," Aluko said on PBS, but "he did not give us the debt cancellation that we wanted. He did not make some mention of the death of Chief Abiola and his wife, and (of) Ken Saro-Wiwa (a poet and Ogoni activist executed by Sani Abacha)." Like Okome, Aluko thinks the Muslim-Christian dispute over sharia in eight northern states is "a major problem," a

constitutional crisis in which President Obasanjo "has clearly fallen flat on his face."

Whatever the long-term results of the United States engagement with Nigeria, many Nigerians worldwide hope President Clinton's visit will lead to constructive change. As Clinton proclaimed, Nigeria "is a place of untapped opportunity because it is a place of unlimited potential."

"The resilience, the wonderfulness, the energy – Nigeria can be compared favorably with the United States of America," said Bola Ige, Obasanjo's minister for power and steel, adding bluntly: "If you know how to package shit, you can sell it in Nigeria. I want this country to be the first black superpower."

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