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Blair Pushes G-8, African Leaders to Improve Lives

By Zack Gross

Michael Jordan did it. Mark Messier did it, too! Now, it's Tony Blair's turn. As he finishes up his ten years as the United Kingdom's Prime Minister, Blair is indulging in a "Farewell Tour."

With the G-8, the world's wealthiest nations, about to meet in Germany from June 6th to 8th, Blair is calling for action on the issues that he championed at the pinnacle of his power, in particular the welfare of African people.

Speaking during a South African stop on his multi-country tour, Blair urged rich nations to keep their promises of increased financial aid to Africa, saying that failure to do so will not only derail African progress, but ultimately affect the rest of the world, as well. He also spoke out against authoritative regimes, such as Zimbabwe and Sudan, saying that African leaders need to focus on governance issues if they wish the best for their people.

German Chancellor Angela Merkel has vowed to continue Blair's role of challenging the G-8 to be more generous. The world is now at the halfway point in the fifteen year United Nations Millennium Development Goals timeframe, announced in 2000, yet is well behind in the economic and assistance targets that were set. Blair, during his tenure, was also outspoken on climate change, which scientists believe will affect Africa the most, partly because the people are already so poor.

African Monitor, a South Africa-based NGO is warning that, despite Western promises at previous G-8 meetings, aid to the continent has been static the past two years and is set to drop.

The monitoring group says that even though some debt has been written off and aid to Africa is more prominent in the news, the grassroots are not benefiting in needed rural, agricultural development. British observers agree, putting a different spin on the issue, saying that increased aid without increased accountability will not solve Africa's problems.

Blair proved himself to be an interventionist Prime Minister, with forays into Kosovo, Sierra Leone, Afghanistan and Iraq. He has seen himself, in his own defense, as "advancing freedom, opportunity and justice for all," while observers and critics have had a more mixed or even entirely negative reaction to his foreign actions.

The Liberal Democrat opposition in the British Parliament has said that Blair is "trying to rewrite" history during his tour, and that "high points" such as Kosovo and Sierra Leone have been "overshadowed by the disaster of Iraq."

Africa's other hot spot, Darfur, where government-backed Arab militias have been waging a genocidal campaign against their African countrymen, was beyond Blair's reach, as he had overextended himself in other global arenas. Maybe that will be Darfur's epitaph – everyone was too busy elsewhere!

Blair is very popular in Sierra Leone, thanks to his 2000 military intervention, which routed rival armed militias and restored civilian rule. On the other hand, Zimbabwe's Robert Mugabe, has been openly disdainful of Blair, who has criticized his hard-line rule. Mugabe is happy to see Blair leave, especially before he does.

Mugabe has said that Blair is "too young" to know anything of Africa's colonial past and that his interventions are a continuation of Britain's historically oppressive role on the continent. Mugabe, ironically, has used the British PM's opposition to maintain his own power, by calling the Zimbabwean opposition "agents of Blairism." Blair's allies and Mugabe's critics, in looking at the elderly African strongman clinging to power, say that at least Blair knows when to quit!

As Blair departs, the question arises: will his Commission for Africa and his Africa Enterprise Challenge Fund ebb away as well? Some will say that Blair's African policy was just window dressing to distract people from his pro-Americanism.

Others will say that his view of African development never really had the blessing of African leaders.

Those who supported Mr. Blair in Africa hope that his successor, current finance minister Gordon Brown, will also be interested in supporting African development. At least, said the South African Cape Times, Tony Blair did put Africa's challenges on the world map.

Tony Blair and Nelson Mandela, father of modern multiracial South Africa, are one another's fans. Blair has singled Mandela out as responsible for the great political changes that have taken place in South Africa. Mandela has urged Blair to continue his fight against poverty and oppression once he steps down from his grueling Prime Ministerial "day job."

At 54, says Mandela, Blair is still young enough to become even more active than he has been. Others echo that sentiment, pointing out all that Mandela, Bill Clinton and other retired leaders have done in recent years to fight AIDS and promote charitable institutions.

Hopefully, Tony Blair will do more than write a few books and make a lot of speeches during his "retirement."

Those kinds of activities bring in the big bucks, but Tony Blair can best promote his agenda for Africa, if it is genuine, and improve his image amongst his detractors, by

moving the world toward meeting the UN Millennium Development Goals by the 2015 deadline.

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