

# African leaders support US, but fear domestic opposition

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Leaders throughout Africa have pledged their support for the United States' "war against terrorism". However, many expressed reservations about supporting US military action in Afghanistan for fear they would fall victim to the popular opposition this would arouse at home. But despite bitter experience of previous US operations in Africa, none of them articulated any fundamental opposition to US foreign policy or questioned the direction in which the Bush administration is heading.

Sudan is one of a number of African countries accused by the US of sponsoring terrorism, and is specifically accused of giving support to Osama bin Laden, whom it expelled in 1996 under US pressure. In August 1998, the US bombed the Al-Shifa pharmaceutical plant in Khartoum, said to be manufacturing chemical weapons and linked to bin Laden. No proof that such chemical weapons existed has ever been forthcoming.

The Sudanese government is desperate to win US support. According to the BBC, agents from the FBI and the CIA have been stationed within Sudan for the last year, working closely with Sudanese intelligence to "investigate claims that terrorist groups are based in Sudan." A foreign ministry official assured reporters that there was no way bin Laden would be allowed to return and that "we are party to the fight against terrorism". Accompanying these assurances, however, Sudanese President Omar el-Bashir felt it necessary to caution against any attack on Afghanistan or any killing of civilians, as this would "create bitterness, which will bring up generations that may be more aggressive, more hostile in dealing with the international community."

Somalia is another African country accused of being a possible safe haven for bin Laden. It was invaded by US troops in 1992, leading a UN operation that it was claimed would bring humanitarian assistance. Although the country was torn apart by civil war, such was the

opposition to a US occupation that the population of Mogadishu, the capital, fought against the US troops, killing 18. All American troops were withdrawn by 1995 and the country has continued to be divided by warring factions. Last year a Western-backed transitional government was established, but it still only controls part of the country. A spokesman for the government denied that bin Laden would be welcome, saying, "We are ready to share information and cooperate with the US in their war against terrorism."

Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi dropped his anti-American rhetoric and declared at a recent public rally, "The United States has the right to seek revenge." Libya remains on the US list of countries accused of sponsoring terrorism. Gaddafi also warned the US against an attack on Afghanistan, saying, "The US could ensure it gets the support of Islamic governments, but their people could well not adopt the same stand."

President Charles Taylor of Liberia was determined to show unreserved support for US military action. Liberia has also been dubbed a "rogue state", having been placed under UN sanctions for backing the rebel Revolutionary United Front in neighbouring Sierra Leone. A Liberian radio station that received calls from listeners registering their opposition to the US government after the September 11 terrorist attacks was immediately closed down and the presenter thrown in jail for "contravening national security interests." Police have also been instructed to arrest as a "terrorist" anyone found buying or selling photographs of bin Laden.

The Algerian government is reported to have given US officials a list of 350 supposed Islamic militants living outside Algeria and wanted by the regime. It is likely that many on this list will be socialist or democratic opponents of the military regime. In return they have requested sophisticated military hardware to use against "Islamic terrorists". Such requests have been refused in the past on

human rights grounds. More and more evidence is now emerging that the Algerian military regime infiltrated Islamic fundamentalist groups to carry out terror attacks over the last decade, in which tens of thousands of civilians were killed, in order to divert growing opposition to their rule. There are no reports of the response to the Algerian government from Washington.

Other leaders giving their full support for US military intervention included the President of Senegal Abdoulaye Wade and Kenyan President Daniel Arap Moi. Wade called for African countries to “engage in direct actions in the global fight [against terrorism]”. Both countries are strategic military bases for Western operations. Kenya was the base from which the United States invaded Somalia, and the American embassy in Nairobi is the centre of US intelligence operations for Sudan, the Horn of Africa and the Congo. Senegal provided the base for the British invasion of Sierra Leone last year.

South Africa is the economic and military powerhouse of the continent and the African National Congress government has been at pains to solidarise itself with Washington. A government spokesman said South Africa, “recognized the right of the US government to track down the culprits and bring them to justice.” Military involvement had not been requested, but “Pretoria had offered such support and aid as might be required within the limits of its capacity”, with South Africa’s security agencies continuing to co-operate with their US counterparts. However, any action taken should be informed by “thorough investigations and incontrovertible evidence”.

The nervousness engendered amongst Africa’s ruling elite by America’s militaristic and bellicose stance can be seen in the article by President Thabo Mbeki in the African National Congress weekly magazine, *ANC Today*. In a lengthy and moralistic denunciation of terrorism, Mbeki’s only aim is to distance the ANC from any past involvement in terrorist acts.

He states correctly that the ANC attempted to avoid civilian targets, as opposed to the apartheid regime, which carried out civilian massacres throughout southern Africa. The ANC did not resort to terrorism even “in the context of the massacre of the children of Soweto and other massacres afterwards, including the killings that took place even as we were engaged in negotiations with the apartheid regime”.

Seven years after the ANC assumed power Mbeki’s sensitivity towards accusations of terrorism is extraordinary. As the apartheid regime was being swept

aside by a mass movement in the townships and throughout South Africa, the ANC played a key role for the imperialist powers, employing its widespread support in the black population to negotiate a compromise settlement that ended white minority rule but did not challenge Western and US corporate interests in the region. However at that time it was none other than Dick Cheney, now US Vice President, who called Nelson Mandela a terrorist and refused to meet him in jail. Mbeki’s fears that should he and the ANC government be seen as an obstacle to US policy it is not inconceivable that they could once again be denounced as “terrorists”, or at least supporters of terrorism.

The FBI has given South Africa, Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania lists of names of people believed to be linked to Bin Laden. Kenya’s list includes 200 names, according to press reports, and US investigators are said to be scrutinising banking transactions in Kenya’s second city of Mombasa. Tanzanian police have said they received 60 names. South African and Ugandan police have not divulged how many names they have been given.

Such demands for a political clampdown will also fuel anti-US sentiments. On September 23, thousands demonstrated in the Somali capital Mogadishu against the United States and in support of bin Laden. The Transitional National Government had earlier condemned the demonstration, but allowed it to go ahead because of the extent of public anger towards the US. The next day the United Nations withdrew its international staff from Somalia, blaming the fact that flights to and from Mogadishu could no longer be insured. The European Union was more frank, when it withdrew its expatriate staff last week because of what it described as the “general tension and uncertainty” in the country.



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