June 27, 2003

Bush Calls for Changes in Africa to End Wars and Promote Trade

By RICHARD W. STEVENSON

WASHINGTON, June 26 — President Bush outlined an ambitious agenda today for advancing peace and prosperity in Africa. He demanded that Liberia's leader step down to avert further bloodshed in his country, called for a change of government in Zimbabwe and for the dispatching of an envoy to broker an end to the long civil war in Sudan.

Speaking to a group of African leaders, business executives and investors here, Mr. Bush also pledged $100 million to help Kenya and other countries fight terrorism and made a case for expanded trade as the most powerful engine for fighting poverty on the continent.

Mr. Bush is to leave in 11 days on his first trip as president to sub-Saharan Africa, and his speech today was his most expansive statement of policy on the continent to date. It was particularly striking for his blunt calls for change in nations that have been wracked by violence.

Among them was Liberia, where there has been heavy fighting between rebels and forces loyal to President Charles Taylor, who has been indicted on war crimes charges in a court run jointly by the neighboring nation of Sierra Leone and the United Nations.

"President Taylor needs to step down," Mr. Bush said, "so that his country can be spared further bloodshed."

But he gave no indication that he would respond to calls from people in Liberia to send American troops to stop the fighting there, which has intensified in recent days after Mr. Taylor reversed a promise earlier this month to yield power as part of a cease-fire agreement.

Mr. Bush made clear his willingness to use the diplomatic influence of the United States in an effort to transform some of Africa's worst battlegrounds, including Liberia, Sudan and Congo, but he suggested that he would not seek to exert power unilaterally. He called on regional governments and pan-African organizations to end a "cycle of attack and escalation" among the warring parties and build effective peacekeeping forces.

"It is Africans who will overcome these problems," Mr. Bush said. "Yet the United States of America and other nations will stand beside them."

Most recent presidents have dipped from time to time into Africa's problems. But, in part because there is limited domestic political pressure to do so, they have rarely shown a lasting commitment to dealing with the continent's deeply rooted troubles.

Congress has also proven reluctant to provide large-scale economic aid or to make trade concessions that would extract a price from domestic constituencies.

But to the surprise of many advocacy groups who have long called on the United States to do more to fight disease and poverty in Africa, Mr. Bush has taken an increasing interest in the region, and has proposed substantial increases in spending to fight AIDS and promote economic development.

In doing so, aides said, he has been pushed along by a diverse group of advisers, from Secretary of State Colin L. Powell, an early and forceful advocate of increased engagement in Africa, to religious organizations, who have cited the humanitarian imperative, to his national security team, which has called for action to keep some African nations from harboring and breeding terrorists.

In his half-hour speech, to the U.S.-Africa Business Summit, he laid out a vision of an Africa policy built on a moral duty to address suffering, a national interest in promoting stability in failed states and an ideological belief in spreading democracy and capitalism.

"This is a long term commitment," Mr. Bush said. "And I know there are serious obstacles to overcome. Introducing democracy is hard in any society. It's much harder in a society torn by war, or held back by corruption. The promise of free markets means little when millions are illiterate or hungry, or dying from a preventable disease."

The United States, he said, would stand with and aid those nations that showed a willingness to tackle their problems.

"Corrupt regimes that give nothing to their people deserve nothing from us," he said. "Governments that serve their people deserve our help, and we will provide that help."

Following up on Mr. Powell's call this week for South Africa and other African nations to do more to oust President Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe, whose increasingly authoritarian rule is driving the country into economic and political chaos, Mr. Bush said it was time "to encourage a return to democracy" in that country.

Mr. Bush also pledged an active role in bringing peace to Sudan, where, he said, two million people have died over the last two decades in Africa's longest-running civil war. He said he had asked his special envoy to Sudan, John C. Danforth, a former Republican senator from Missouri, to travel to the country in two weeks to bring an end to the conflict.

"He will make clear that the only option on the table is peace," Mr. Bush said of Mr. Danforth.

The president's plan to allocate $100 million to help Kenya and several other countries bolster antiterrorism efforts will go to help improve security at airports and ports, step up border patrols and develop better databases and intelligence sharing about terrorists.

Kenya, the site of a terrorist attack against Israeli vacationers last November that was linked to Al Qaeda and of a 1998 attack on the United States Embassy in Nairobi that killed more than 200 people, has been hard hit by a downturn in tourism this year because of terrorism fears, deepening its economic problems.

Mr. Bush repeated his call for the European Union to allow imports from Africa of genetically modified agricultural products. Europe currently bars imports of most genetically altered foods, a position that American officials say has discouraged Africans from planting them and therefore from reaping the benefits of higher yields in countries that are chronically short both of food and export opportunities.

If Africa were to grow and raise genetically modified crops and animals on a large scale, their higher yield might allow the continent to raise the volume of its agricultural exports and feed more of its own people at the same time.

Europeans, however, have strongly resisted the introduction of genetically modified foods.

Mr. Bush did not specify whether he would support trade policy changes in the United States that many African leaders say are vital to the economic development of their countries. Among them are allowing textile imports, which are effectively barred under current legislation, and cutting subsidies to American farmers on crops also grown in Africa, especially cotton.

Susan E. Rice, a former assistant secretary of state for African affairs under President Bill Clinton, said the speech showed considerable continuity in policy toward Africa since Mr. Clinton's two terms in office. But she said Mr. Bush did not go far enough in finding ways to promote more investment and economic expansion in Africa.

Copyright 2003 The New York Times Company