

ZAIRE'S MOBUTU VISITS AMERICA

President Mobutu Sese Seko of Zaire arrived in Washington this week for an official visit with George Bush, Administration officials, and congressional leaders. This visit comes just one week after the Zairean leader negotiated a cease-fire to Angola's 14-year civil war, paving the way for negotiations between the Angolan regime and Jonas Savimbi's National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA).

It is appropriate that Mobutu will be the first African head of state that Bush welcomes to the White House. During his 23-year reign in Zaire, Mobutu has proved one of America's strongest African allies. On a continent where U.S. influence is limited, his support for American policies and strategic objectives has often been critical to U.S. security interests. Example: Mobutu sent his air and ground troops to Chad in 1982 to defend the nation against Libyan aggression. Example: In Angola, Mobutu has been a catalyst in supporting the U.S. objective of reconciliation between Angola's warring parties and, though he denies playing such a role, reportedly in assisting the U.S. in supplying the UNITA Freedom Fighters. In the international arena, Mobutu has been a voice of reason and moderation, condemning the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and the seating of the Moroccan terrorist group Polisario at the Organization of African Unity (OAU).

Bordering on nine African nations and representing a land mass three times the combined size of France and West Germany, Zaire (formerly the Belgian Congo) is perhaps sub-Saharan Africa's most strategically important nation. As such, continued strong relations with Mobutu serve U.S. interests in Africa. In meetings with Mobutu, Bush and his aides should commend the Zairean for the cooperative and constructive role his nation has played in African affairs, and pledge a continued commitment to Zaire's security needs.

Curbing State Corruption. The Bush Administration, however, also should discuss with Mobutu the concerns that potentially endanger relations between Washington and Kinshasa. Most prominent are the extensive corruption allegations directed against Mobutu's government. Last year alone, an estimated \$400 million reportedly was diverted from trade revenues in ways the government has failed to explain. State corruption is a deeply entrenched problem in many African nations; in this sense it is unfair to single out Mobutu's government for criticism. Mobutu, moreover, this month accepted the conditions of an International Monetary Fund (IMF) program that reportedly includes much closer scrutiny of the country's finances. The Bush Administration should commend Mobutu on this. It should urge Mobutu to go further to curb state corruption. Such steps might include appointment of an independent commission to monitor public expenditures. The Bush Administration also should tell Mobutu that unless he ends corruption in his government, the allegations will continue to tarnish him politically and, like the Marcos regime in the Philippines, eventually could erode his political legitimacy.

Bush will want too to commend Mobutu on his recent successes, such as Zaire's improving human rights record, which was once a major source of criticism. This February, the United Nations Commission on Human Rights removed Zaire from a list of countries under human rights investigation and noted the government's cooperation in improving its previously stained human rights record. And this March, Mobutu ordered the release of 308 political prisoners. The Bush Administration should commend Mobutu on these achievements and then urge him to do more.

Market Successes. U.S. officials should discuss Zaire's economic development with Mobutu. Though still very underdeveloped, Zaire recently has begun making some economic progress. This March, for instance, the World Bank listed Zaire as one of several Third World nations growing economically. This is due at least partly to Mobutu's new monetary and fiscal policies that eliminated many price controls, tightened the country's money supply, and encourage foreign investment. Tighter money supply has cut inflation sharply, while elimination of most price controls has increased agricultural and industrial production. Zaire has increased foreign trade. The U.S. is Zaire's third largest trading partner, purchasing \$383 million worth of Zairean products last year, predominantly oil and copper. U.S. exports to Zaire increased last year 18 percent, reaching \$122 million, mainly wheat and mining and transportation equipment. The Bush Administration should encourage greater U.S. trade ties with Zaire. Bush should urge Mobutu to trim his nation's bloated federal budget through privatization and waste-cutting measures. Mineral-rich Zaire has great potential for economic growth, but it will only do so if Mobutu continues to expand market-oriented policies.

Finally, Mobutu should be encouraged to continue strategic cooperation with the U.S., especially in assisting the U.S. in helping the Angolan Freedom Fighters who, with continued assistance, may be on the verge of achieving a political settlement in Angola. Bush should also pledge continued military assistance to Zaire. Over the past five years, the U.S. has provided Zaire with \$30 million in military assistance. This year, the Bush Administration has asked Congress for \$10 million in military assistance for Zaire.

Bush should also tell Mobutu that the U.S. may be willing to help Zaire complete its Kamina Air Base. Once completed, Bush should request from Mobutu permission to deploy military air force units there. The U.S. has no short or intermediate-range air access in the region, and Kamina potentially offers the U.S. a base from which to project air power in a crisis in sub-Saharan Africa or the Persian Gulf.

Helping An Ally. Mobutu's visit to Washington comes at a very important time. Throughout Africa, several longstanding conflicts are beginning to reach a critical juncture. To Zaire's south, in Angola, the future of an entire nation is likely to be decided in the reconciliation talks that Mobutu helped initiate. To Zaire's north, in the Sudan, a growing international consensus is emerging to end the country's brutal civil war between Sudan's Muslim government and its Christian rebels. In both these cases, Mobutu can play an important and constructive role in helping promulgate peace and freedom. Like most Third World leaders, Mobutu has his warts. But his visit to Washington presents an opportunity for the Bush Administration to help an ally correct his problems, while still reaffirming an important strategic alliance.

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For further information:

Steve Askin, "Mobutu Comes Calling," *Africa News*, June 12, 1989.

William Pascoe, "Strengthening the U.S.-Zaire Relationship," Heritage Foundation *Backgrounders* No. 551, December 5, 1986.