America's summit on Africa

IN 1996, Americans con-
soled with ill-formed Amer-
ican policy towards Africa in the wake of the Cold
War's demise had a dream of reorienting American foreign
policy so that Africa and Af-
ricans would be able to ben-
efit.
After four long years of
work and a series of regional
summits throughout the
United States, the effort cul-
inuated this past weekend
(February 16-20) with The
National Summit on Africa:
Dialogue and Celebration of
Africa.
Over 5,000 people from all
calls of life -- academics, art-
ists, politicians, diplomats,
journalists, students, or-
phans, activists, civil serv-
ants, businessmen, and more
-- descended on Washington
DC for the Summit in an at-
tem to show the American
public that Africa matters;
that far from being the 'dark
continent', Africa is in the
midst of an awakening that
could make it an extremely
important part of global poli-
tics and economics in the
near future.
The conference was offi-
cially opened by President
Bill Clinton, a man who in
spite of many flaws, has cer-
tainly placed Africa on the
American political agenda
more than any other Ameri-
can president. Clinton spoke
of the promise and tremen-
dous progress that Africa has
experienced over the last
decade, much of it unheralded.
He said, "It is no longer an option for us not
to know the trials and tri-
umphs of people who share
this small planet. We can no
longer choose not to know...Americans must
choose, when it comes to
Africa, to make a difference."
United States Secretary of
State Madeleine Albright, al-
though not able to attend
the Summit because of commit-
ments in East Timor, said in
her prepared remarks read on
her behalf by Professor
Ibrahim Gambari, "I see a
continent that is more demo-
cratic than it has ever been,
more economically open and
more alive with energy of a
growing civil society. But our
response to the examples of
misery and conflict must be
to roll up our sleeves -- not
throw up our hands. The hu-
man stakes are too high and
the implications for our own
future too great to simply
walk away."
American Vice-President
Al Gore who also spoke at
the event, said that it was im-
portant for the future of the
United States that Africa does
well and that he felt con-
fident that Africa was poised
for success. He re-
marked, "The world should
have taken from Africans not
their valuables, but their val-
ues of family and commu-
nity."
Gore was not the only
presidential contender who
hoped to gain support through identifying with the
African cause. Although
presidential candidates
George W. Bush and Bill
Bradley were not able to
attend personally because of
campaign commitments else-
where, they were represented
by campaign lieutenants.
The person representing Bradley
was none other than former
United States ambassador to
Nigeria, Walter Carrington.
Was this all just political
rhetoric, was the Summit too
grand and ambitious, would
attendees really be able to
roll up their sleeves and start
making a difference? How
was anything accomplished at
such a massive event? In
many ways, the Summit was
two different events happen-
ing simultaneously.
Part of it involved delib-
erative sessions for dele-
tegates selected from each of
the fifty United States dis-
cussing the Summit's five
main initiatives: peace and
security; sustainable develop-
ment; education and cul-
ture; democracy and human
rights; economic development;
trade and investment.
Out of these deliberative ses-
sions, a document outlining
the Summit's proposal for
how American policy to
wards Africa should be
structured was developed and
submitted to President Bill
Clinton.
During a press confer-
ence, Summit organizer Am-
bassador Andrew Young re-
marked that the event was
not for Africans, but for
Americans. The statement
was unfortunate and again
showed that even Americans
who seem genuinely inter-
ested in improving Africa's
future see Africans as peo-
ple they do things for and to
rather than with. However, so
many of the delegates were
Africans resident in the
United States that regardless
of the organizers' objectives,
the voices of Africans were
certainly heard.
The other aspect of the
event was for those attend-
ing who were not delegates.
This part involved a series of
panel discussions on issues
ranging from the AIDS pan-
demic to debt cancellation to
investment to the role of
youth.
The Summit was certainly
an event I was pleased to at-
tend and honoured to partici-
pate in as a speaker. What I
enjoyed most was seeing
how the profile of Nigeria and
Nigerians has changed so
dramatically in the last year.
President Clinton thanked
Nigeria for the involvement
in peace keeping in West
Africa.
The organizers kept talk-
ing about the transforma-
tions taking place in Nigeria
and how Obasanjo and
Akitu were going to recon-
struct not only Nigeria, but
all of Africa. Nigerians them-
selves were there in force,
some as state delegates, some
as part of the official
Nigerian delegation led by
Vice-President Akitu, and
some just as interested indi-
viduals. All were certainly
basking in the glory of their
reborn nation.
At the lunch featuring
African leaders, Nigerians
stole the show. This was
partly because of the dazzling
performance of Ekemini
Theatre Troupe, a group of
young (some as young as
four years old) Nigerian mu-
sicians, but also because of
Vice-President Abubakar
Akitu. A man usually seen
in bubaigha, at the Summit he
was resplendent in a high
fashion Western suit.
After a long drawn out,
rhettic filled speech by Ken-
yan president Daniel Arap
MoI, Vice-President Akitu
took to the stage as attend-
eds were starting to get bored
with the proceedings. He im-
mediately caught everyone's
attention, and promised to
keep his remarks short and
to the point. He fulfilled his
promise and received a
standing ovation for his ef-
forts. Afterwards, he slowly
made his way through the
crowd towards his vehicle,
stopping along the way to
chat casually with the crowds
of people waiting to greet
him.
For five days, Africa took
centre stage in Washington
DC. Although the National
Summit on Africa was far
from perfect and it is difficult
to ascertain how many of the
recommendations will be fol-
lowed, it was definitely a suc-
cess. It proved to the Ameri-
can public, a public usually
ignorant of Africa, that Af-
rica is becoming an increas-
ingly important dimension of
American foreign policy. Per-
haps its more lasting legacy
will be the important connec-
tions made between people
with similar goals regarding
their vision for Africa, creat-
ing the kinds of networks be-
 tween Africans and Ameri-
cans that will be necessary
for changes to happen on
both sides of the Atlantic.
Let me end by saying this.
Nigerians, take heart, the
image of Nigeria and Africa is
changing in the international
community, a change that is
extremely important for the
promised investment and the
sought after debt relief to
become a reality.
Although the changes
democracy has brought to
Nigeria internally may still
not be as tangible as many
had hoped, the changes it
has resulted in abroad are
tremendous. And it is
through the change in the in-
ternational perception of
Nigeria that the internal trans-
formation might sooner than
later be derived.

AFRICA, KNOWN MORE FOR WARS: Soldiers from the West African intervention force ECOMOG stand guard in front of the Hotel Cap Sierra in Freetown, Sierra Leone, recently. Photo: AFP