

# America's summit on Africa

IN 1996, Americans concerned with ill-formed American policy towards Africa in the wake of the Cold War's demise had a dream of reorienting American foreign policy so that Africa and Africans would be able to benefit.

After four long years of work and a series of regional summits throughout the United States, the effort culminated this past weekend (February 16-20) with *The National Summit on Africa: Dialogue and Celebration of Africa*.

Over 5,000 people from all walks of life – academics, artists, politicians, diplomats, journalists, students, orphans, activists, civil servants, businessmen, and more – descended on Washington DC for the *Summit* in an attempt 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 politics and economics in the near future.

The conference was officially opened by President Bill Clinton, a man who in spite of many flaws, has certainly placed Africa on the American political agenda more than any other American president. Clinton spoke of the promise and tremendous 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 triumphs 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, although not able to attend the *Summit* because of commitments in East Timor, said in her prepared remarks read on her behalf by Professor Ibrahim Gambari, "I see a continent that is more democratic 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 human stakes are way 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 important for the future of the United States that Africa does well and that he felt confident that Africa was poised for success. He remarked, "The world should have taken from Africans not their valuables, but their values of family and community."

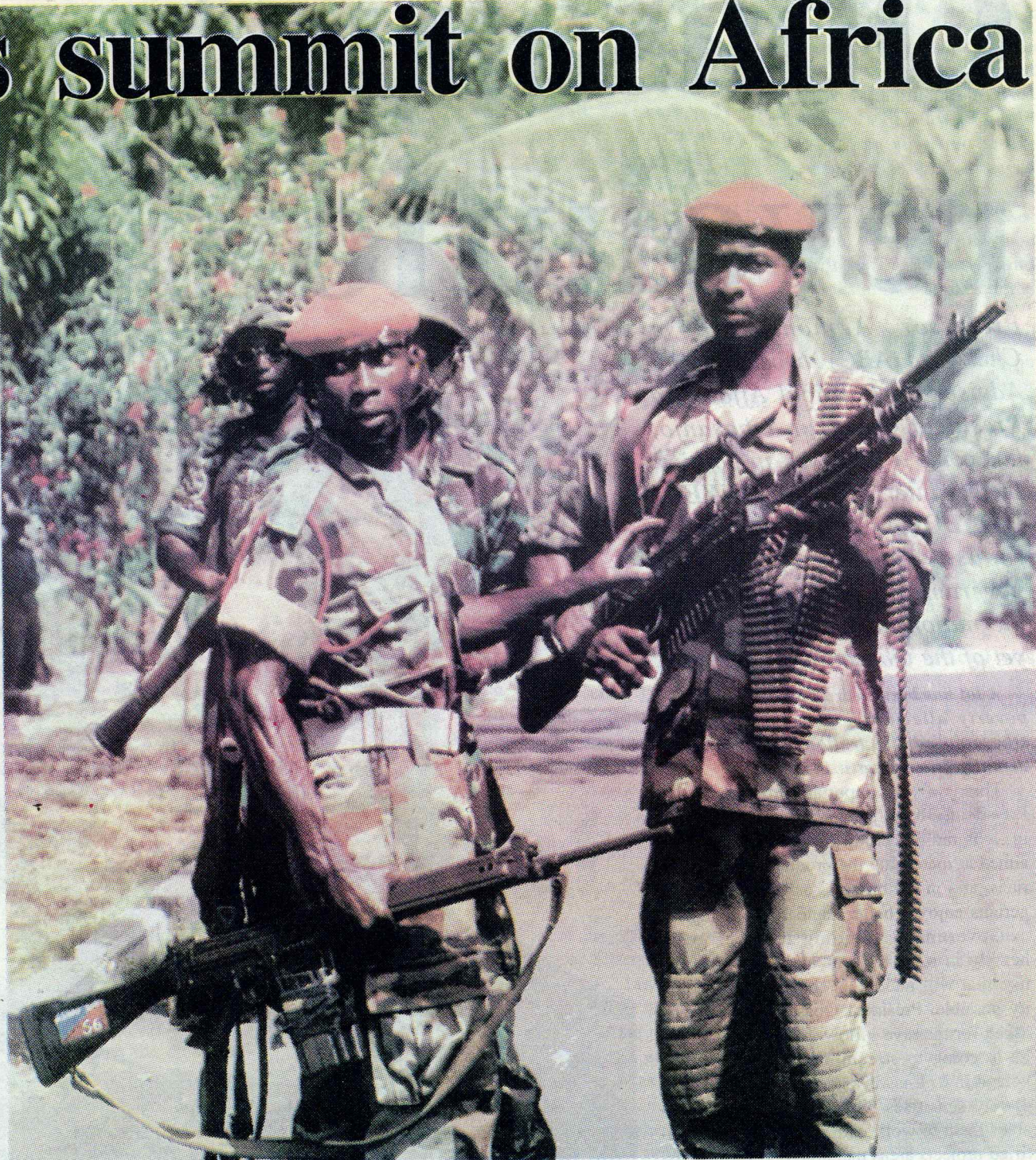
Gore was not the only presidential contender who hoped to gain support through identifying with the African cause. Although presidential candidates George W. Bush and Bill Bradley were not able to attend personally because of campaign commitments elsewhere, they were represented by campaign lieutenants. 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 happening simultaneously.

Part of it involved deliberative sessions for delegates selected from each of the fifty United States discussing the *Summit's* five main initiatives: peace and security; sustainable development; education and culture; democracy and human rights; economic development, trade and investment. Out of these deliberative sessions, a document outlining the *Summit's* proposal for how American policy towards Africa should be structured was developed and submitted to President Bill Clinton.

During a press conference, *Summit* organizer Ambassador Andrew Young remarked that the event was not for Africans, but for Americans. The statement was unfortunate and again showed that even Americans who seem genuinely interested in improving Africa's future see Africans as people 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 attending who were not delegates.



•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

This part involved a series of panel discussions on issues ranging from the AIDS pandemic to debt cancellation to investment to the role of youth.

The *Summit* was certainly an event I was pleased to attend and honoured to participate 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 talking about the transformations taking place in Nigeria and how Obasanjo and Atiku were going to reconstruct not only Nigeria, but all of Africa. Nigerians themselves were there in force, some as state delegates, some as part of the official Nigerian delegation led by Vice President Atiku, and some just as interested individuals. All were certainly



basking in the glory of their reborn nation.

At the luncheon 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 musicians, but also because of Vice-President Abubakar Atiku. A man usually seen in babariga, at the *Summit* he was resplendent in a high fashion Western suit.

After a long drawn out, rhetoric filled speech by Kenyan president Daniel Arap Moi, Vice-President Atiku took to the stage as attendees were starting to get bored with the proceedings. He immediately 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 efforts. 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 followed, it was definitely a success. It proved to the American public, a public usually ignorant of Africa, that Africa is becoming an increas-

ingly important dimension of American foreign policy. Perhaps its more lasting legacy will be the important connections made between people with similar goals regarding their vision for Africa, creating the kinds of networks between Africans and Americans 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 international perception of Nigeria that the internal transformation might sooner than later be derived.