



WORKING DAY AND NIGHT

SINCE LEAVING OFFICE, FORMER UK PRIME MINISTER TONY BLAIR HAS CONTINUED TO HELP EMERGING AFRICAN STATES ATTRACT FOREIGN INVESTORS AND REMODEL THEMSELVES TOWARDS A BETTER FUTURE

WORDS HELEN JENNINGS PHOTOGRAPHY SUNDAY AGHAEZE

Africa was central to Tony Blair's foreign policy during his time as Britain's prime minister. His initiatives included the Commission for Africa, the Gleneagles G8 summit and military intervention in Sierra Leone. Since stepping down from office in 2007, Blair has thrown his diplomatic weight and negotiation expertise behind a handful of development, governance and peace organisations. One of those bodies is Africa Governance Initiative (AGI), advising heads of state in Rwanda, Liberia and Sierra Leone on policy delivery and reform, tackling poverty as well as attracting foreign investments to the once war-torn states. It's Blair's belief that without progress on governance all other reforms will have limited effect in reducing poverty across the continent. The key then is developing private sector investment, beyond aid.

In Abuja for the THISDAY Awards 2010, he sat down with ARISE to discuss his views on the current challenges and opportunities for Nigeria, and Africa as a whole.

What are your thoughts on vice president Jonathan Goodluck's recent appointment to acting president after the prolonged absence of president Umaru Yar'Adua due to illness?

There were certainly many worse ways that the situation could have been resolved and I think the British government has said it welcomes what has taken place. No one knew the president was going to be ill but people are dealing with this somewhat unique and difficult position in the right and proper way.

“I see Nigeria as a key world power. If it fails to become that, it fails its own destiny.”

It's got big implications for Nigeria and beyond, so I hope that Nigeria can carry on governing itself and making progress.

Do you think the aim of the federal government's Vision 2020 – that by 2020 Nigeria will be one of the 20 largest economies in the world – is a realistic one?

The world is changing very fast. The G8 has become irrelevant, it's now the G20 and becoming broader than that. So the best way for Nigeria to realise that 2020 ambition is to reunify the country behind the vision and deal with the obstacles in its way. Corruption is an issue, the rule of law is an issue, the private sector and how it can compete is an issue. All those things are important because if people think there is a system being created that by hard work and merit you succeed, hard work and merit is what they'll go for. But if people think it's about who you know or backhanders, that's the system they'll play. This is why it's so important to get things right. I think there is a will to do that, Nigeria has made many advances these past few years so they've got the world at their feet, really. If you look at Nigeria objectively and ask 'Can it fulfil its objectives?' The answer is, of course it can. ◀



ARISE EDITOR
HELEN JENNINGS
MEETS TONY BLAIR
IN ABUJA

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Is Nigeria still important to the UK and its foreign policy today?

Nigeria is very important. You've got a lot of Nigerian people living in London; my elder children had a lot of Nigerian friends when they went to primary school in Islington. There is a big Nigerian community there and Britain feels a very strong tie to Nigeria. In time to come, one of the things my country should do is leverage our traditional relationships in a different world and be Nigeria's partner in many of the things it's trying to do economically and politically.

As Nigeria celebrates 50 years of independence this year, the fact is much of Africa has little to celebrate. And this is in spite of the US\$50 billion in aid relief pledged

at the G8 summit in 2005, to be delivered by 2010, and other initiatives you've been involved with including the Africa Commission. Are you disappointed in progress since Gleneagles?

The truth is, a lot has been done and there's a lot still to do. What has been done is cancellation of debt, which has released an awful lot of money. Also far more African governments change hands democratically than ever before. There's a real will in Nigeria that next year's presidential election will be as good as it can be. There are real changes compared to 20 years ago. It's always easy to find reasons for pessimism but personally I am optimistic about Africa and its future.

What does the AGI do and why did you set it up in the first place?

I spent a lot of my time as prime minister trying to cancel debt and increase aid. We trebled aid to Africa with the Department of International Development. Afterward, I didn't believe in the dead-aid thesis because aid is necessary. What I concluded is that it was insufficient. The other important thing is good governance, and that's not just about the absence of corruption. It's also about institutions that are competent enough to translate decisions into implementation. What the AGI do with the presidents of Rwanda, Sierra Leone and Liberia is put teams of experts together from around the world to work alongside them on their agendas and help build a passage to deliver them. So for example, we just organised the largest private-sector investment conference ever hosted by an African country, in London, for Sierra Leone.

How do you ensure foreign investment in African countries benefits the country as a whole rather than the individual or company?

People always ask themselves 'What is the size of the cake and who can get the biggest part?'

But what we should actually be asking is 'How can we grow the cake?' And that's what successful countries do. That's about realising that the opportunities are immense if you have the right policies to promote them.

Can agencies such as the AGI make a change?

What we help find with the AGI is focus. It's important to prioritise. Working with countries that have had very difficult political periods for a number of years, we'll pick three key priorities and deliver those, and that has a hugely empowering effect. There may be 100 things you need to get done, but let's just do three of them really well to begin with, then people get the hope that more can be done. Otherwise you're sitting there thinking it's all insurmountable.

Where do you see Nigeria, and Africa, in the next 50 years?

I see Nigeria as a key world power. If it fails to become that it fails its own destiny. Nigeria – what do you lack? You've got the people, you've got the resources, and you've got the natural capacity. And it's not like the people aren't smart as well. It's just the systems that are wrong. And the people can change those systems. What works in a country is a strong, well-run and efficient public sector alongside a competitive private sector. It's my belief that the world will not function without Africa functioning and Africa could just be the success story of the 21st century. I think that's possible. ●