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Africa 2014 in Review: Challenges for Genuine Independence and Development

By Abayomi Azikiwe

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During the course of 2014 there was much discussion about the phenomenal economic growth of various African nation-states. The Federal Republic of Nigeria was proclaimed by western financial publications to have attained the status of the largest economy on the continent.

Inside the Republic of South Africa, where two decades earlier the masses of workers, farmers and youth had overthrown the dreaded apartheid system instituting a parliamentary structure with the African National Congress (ANC) being the dominant political force, the voters granted the ruling party another five years of governmental control. South Africa, according to these same financial pundits, is no longer the number one economic powerhouse in the region.

These assessments and efforts by the imperialist-based financial institutions are not only designed to signal to Wall Street and the Pentagon what the new avenues of interests should be but to also cause divisions within the African Union (AU) member-states. Europe and the United States held conferences during 2014 where they decided who the invited guests would be as opposed to the successor of the continental organization that was formed in 1963, the Organization of African Unity (OAU).

The April 2-4 European Union (EU)-Africa Summit excluded key leaders within Africa from Western Sahara, Eritrea, Zimbabwe, Sudan, Egypt and others. As a result of these actions other heads-of-state, such as President Jacob Zuma of the Republic of South Africa, refused to attend. Zuma noted that the time was over for Europeans deciding who should attend a conference and those that will not be invited.

Although the uprisings in Burkina Faso and the industrial strikes that impacted Ghana, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, Liberia and other West African states provided clear indicators that the African working class is challenging the contemporary neo-liberal approach to development and foreign policy, which we will examine in a later report, the impact of the challenges to Africa in 2014 provides ideas that can lead to programs aimed at the eradication of the post-colonial socio-economic quagmires plaguing the region in the 21st century.

Ebola: Its Continental and Global Impact

Overshadowing all other crises and triumphs, the Ebola Virus Disease (EVD) pandemic has dominated the news about Africa. The disease is one of the lethal Viral Hemorrhagic Fevers (VHF) that has infected humans for centuries. Nonetheless, in this period such outbreaks have immediate international implications.

EVD has been present through various strains since 1976 in the former Zaire, now known as the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). Named after a river in the DRC, the disease has become a profound illustration of the challenges facing the continent during the current period.

The lack of medical, educational, transportation and communications infrastructures can be attributed to the rapid spread of EVD in three West African states: Liberia, Sierra Leone and Guinea. In the three most affected states there is the legacy of neo-colonialism, militarism and civil war.

Liberia as a nation-state has origins in the repatriation of Africans in the U.S. during the antebellum slave period of the 19th century. Sierra Leone was founded as a similar home for Africans who fought alongside the British during the so-called American Revolutionary War since London promised freedom to the enslaved Africans for their cooperation during the late 18th century.

Guinea, of course, is a former French colony whose people resisted colonialism and slavery during the 19th century. The Democratic Party of Guinea (PDG) was one of the liberation movements that demanded immediate independence from foreign rule and struck out as a sovereign state in 1958 under President Ahmed Sekou Toure.

After President Toure's death in March 1984 and a subsequent military coup, Guinea has suffered periodic rebellions and unconstitutional changes of government. Over the last thirty years, Conakry has seen instability and deepening underdevelopment.

The western imperialist approach to the EVD pandemic has been highly militarized. The Pentagon through the U.S. Africa Command (AFRICOM) has deployed several thousand more troops to Liberia. AFRICOM already has projects in Sierra Leone as well.

Despite the sluggish response by the U.S., Britain and France, the Republic of Cuba has stepped up to the task sending physicians and other healthcare workers to assist in eradicating the outbreak. Cuba views the intervention in West Africa around the EVD crisis as a continuation of their decades-long solidarity with the peoples of the continent, who share a common bond with the region through heritage, politics and national culture.

There has been much criticism surrounding the response by the Western imperialist states to the EVD outbreak. The tabulation and projections related to the spread of the disease have been a source of disagreement but it is clear that this outbreak poses a monumental challenge to not only West Africa but the entire continent.

A report published by Time.com on Dec. 29 says “Cases of Ebola in Sierra Leone, Liberia and Guinea have reached over 20,000. New numbers released from the World Health Organization (WHO) on Monday show Ebola has infected 20,081 people and killed 7,842. That’s nearly 400 new cases of the disease in just four days.

This same article goes on to note that “Despite missions launched by countries and international groups like the United States and United Nations in the last few months, the disease continues to spread. Sierra Leone has passed Liberia in number of cases. Many are anxiously awaiting a vaccine that’s been estimated to become available in the early part of the new year and researchers are also working on developing drugs to treat Ebola.”

Although other infectious diseases such as measles, polio, malaria, HIV-AIDs account for far more cases of sickness and death than EVD, the rapidity with which this form of VHF has struck the West Africa region is a cause for grave concern. In addition, the way in which the discussion around Ebola entered into the U.S. political framework is also instructive in regard to how the outbreak is perceived.

Due to the infection and eventual death of Liberian national Thomas Eric Duncan in Dallas, Texas during October and the spreading of the disease to two nurses, Nina Pham and Amber Vinson, EVD became a major news story leading up to the 2014 mid-term elections. Calls by politicians and news commentators for the banning of people from the most severely impacted West African states served as a mechanism to stigmatize not only those countries and their people but the continent as a whole.

However, the successful treatment of Pham and Vinson, along with other healthcare workers brought into the U.S. for specialized care after spending time in West Africa, resulted in the near disappearance of the issue from the corporate media radar. Nevertheless, the plight of the people of the affected West Africa states remains and must be addressed by both people on the continent and the international community.

Internal Strife and Militarism: The Republic of South Sudan and the Central African Republic

Even though the EVD pandemic became a cause for concern in the western industrialized and imperialist states, the situations in both the Republic of South Sudan and the Central African Republic (CAR) also stems from the crises of post-colonial Africa. South Sudan came into being after decades of civil unrest and war within the Republic of Sudan based in Khartoum in the north.

In 2011, the U.S., Britain and other states hailed the partition of Sudan, once the largest geographic nation-state in Africa. Today, the government led by the Sudan People's Liberation Movement-Army (SPLM/A) in Juba is split between one faction aligned with President Salva Kiir against another headed by ousted Vice-President Riek Machar.

There have been hundreds of thousands of South Sudanese displaced since the fighting began in Dec. 2013. The presence of Ugandan troops in South Sudan has been a major factor in the regional Inter-Governmental Authority on Development (IGAD) negotiations aimed at a viable ceasefire needed to halt the fighting.

The now SPLM-In Opposition headed by Machar wants the withdrawal of Ugandan People's Defense Forces (UPDF) from the country. Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni says that the military presence in South Sudan is designed to ensure that the instability will not worsen.

Since 2013, the Central African Republic government has changed regimes three times. Ousted President Francois Bozize was forced to resign in April 2013 paving the way for the rebel Muslim-dominated Seleka Coalition headed by Michel Djotodia, who assumed the presidency.

Violence continued under the Seleka Coalition prompting the rise of the Anti-Balaka group consisting of Christian-based militias carrying out reprisals for the brutality inflicted on the population by the Djotodia regime. The minority Muslim population was targeted through the destruction of their businesses and the forcing of thousands of families from homes in the capital of Bangui and other areas of the country.

Up to 20,000 foreign troops from Africa, the EU and former colonial France were slated to occupy the CAR during 2014. The fighting has shifted to border areas near Chad where Muslim fighting groups are seeking to regroup for both self-defense and survival under such dire circumstances.

Both the Republic of South Sudan and the CAR are examples of the challenges facing the continent wracked by neo-colonialism and imperialist intrigue. Both South Sudan and the CAR contain natural resources such as oil, diamonds, gold and uranium among other strategic minerals making these countries a cause of concern for transnational corporations and banks which are still profiting from the world capitalist system and its overall international division of labor and economic power.

African Sovereignty and Genuine Independence Must Take Priority in the Coming Year

The AU and other regional alliances combined with the popular organizations and labor unions should seriously address the implications of developments during 2014. With the inability of present-day African states to effectively address the internal conflicts inside these countries will only provide a rationale for the former colonial powers and the U.S. to militarily intervene to ostensibly resolve these security crises.

This same scenario is clearly related to the response to the EVD pandemic. Infrastructural development has to be a major agenda item for all governments and mass organizations throughout the continent.

AFRICOM has already spread and deepened its involvement throughout the region. This also holds true for the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and the State Department based in Washington. The U.S. response to the EVD outbreak has been largely militaristic and has lacked effectiveness in regard to building field hospitals, clinics, fostering technology transfers, research capacity and access to protective gear as well as medicines.

These same shortcomings apply to both Britain and France as it relates to the response to the EVD crisis. The imperialist states have their own economic and political interests which guides western foreign policy imperatives in regard to Africa.

Consequently, Africa and its people must rise to the occasion and break its dependency on the West. Only when the eradication of neo-colonial relations take center stage will the prospects for real growth and development be realized on the continent.