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Hearing Liberia's Pleas

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The bankruptcy of America's policy toward Africa is evident now in Liberia, a lovely and passionately pro-American country with dazzling white beaches, swaying palms, the greenback for currency — plus 200,000 deaths from unending war, and mass rape that spreads AIDS.

President Bush initially seemed to engage Africa in a way that President Bill Clinton and other predecessors had failed to do. To his great credit, Mr. Bush pushed hard to end Sudan's civil war. He announced a \$15 billion initiative to fight AIDS. He visited Africa and has been responsive to the famine raging in Ethiopia.

Yet while it's too early to be sure, it looks as if Mr. Bush's Africa policy may be no more than a symbolic one, full of ringing sound bites and hollow pledges. Mr. Bush refused to ask Congress for funds to pay fully for his AIDS program. And his Africa trip had a check-the-box quality, suggesting it was more about domestic politics than Africa itself.

Worst of all, with Monrovia (named for James Monroe) now collapsing into killing and cholera, Mr. Bush has sent a symbolic presence to the waters off Monrovia for possible deployment later.

Africa needs a lot of things, but symbols aren't high on the list. Liberian children are not being slaughtered offshore, but on the ground, and that's where troops are needed. Sending troops to Liberian waters is a waffle, a gesture that saves no lives. After 9/11, Mr. Bush displayed leadership, moral clarity and decisiveness in sending troops to Afghanistan; today, Africa desperately needs those same qualities.

"Dithering only makes it worse," notes Ken Menkhaus, an Africa expert at Davidson College, arguing for intervention. "If we don't do it, it'll fester and blow up."

To be sure, the Pentagon's concerns are reasonable and go like this: Remember Somalia! It's easy to get into these countries, difficult to get out. There's no peace to keep, and we're already overdeployed and short on troops. Sure, the slaughter in Liberia is tragic, but it doesn't affect us. The harsh reality is that our hands are too full to rescue a distant people determined to murder one another.

These are not silly arguments, but they can be addressed. Military interventions are always risky, but success looks relatively promising in Liberia. All Liberian factions say they want us on the ground, and ordinary Liberians have been pleading for Mr. Bush to send troops.

Would anybody shoot at us? Probably, but in neighboring Sierra Leone and Ivory Coast, local fighters melted away rather than take on European troops. The ragtag Liberian militias, bereft of popular support, would probably collapse even more quickly.

I argued against invading Iraq, but Liberia presents a much more compelling case for intervention. The difference is not that Saddam slaughtered at most 1 percent of his population over the last 14 years, while Liberian warfare has killed more than 6 percent of its population so far. Nor is it that rescuing Liberia would bolster our international stature rather than devastate it.

No, the crucial differences lie elsewhere. First, Liberia has an urgency to it that Iraq did not: people are being hacked apart daily in Liberia, and if we do nothing, the conflict may spread across West Africa. Second, success can be more easily accomplished in Liberia, using just 1 or 2 percent of the number of troops we have in Iraq, mostly because Liberians desperately want us to intervene.

Liberia's warfare has already infected Sierra Leone, Guinea and Ivory Coast, costing perhaps a half-million lives in all since Charles Taylor grabbed Liberia in 1989. Just as the Rwandan crisis (and Mr. Clinton's failure to respond decisively) led to a catastrophe across central Africa that has cost more than four million lives so far, Liberia's civil war could lead to upheaval across West Africa.

Is U.S. national security at stake in Liberia? Indirectly, yes, for failed states anywhere can threaten us.

A collapsed West Africa could become, like the Taliban's Afghanistan, a haven for terrorists and narcotics, as well as a sanctuary for infectious diseases. Illegal immigrants would pour by the millions out of West Africa into Europe and America. In today's world, as John Donne never wrote, no nation is an island.

Other nations have stepped up to the plate after the collapse of countries where they have a special responsibility: Britain in Sierra Leone, France in Ivory Coast, Australia in East Timor and the Solomon Islands. Now it's our turn.