

A Somber Bush Tours Slave Depot

Opening Africa Trip, President Vows to Support Peace for Liberia

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Wednesday, July 9, 2003; Page A01

GOREE ISLAND, Senegal, July 8 -- President Bush began his five-day trip to Africa today with a reminder of America's history of slavery, touring Senegal's Goree Island, the departure point for millions of Africans sent across the Atlantic.

"At this place, liberty and life were stolen and sold," Bush told a small group of Senegalese invited to the island. "Human beings were delivered and sorted and weighed, and branded with the marks of commercial enterprises and loaded as cargo on a voyage without return. One of the largest migrations of history was also one of the greatest crimes of history."

He also assured a group of West African leaders that the United States would help maintain a cease-fire in Liberia, the nation founded for freed American slaves, but did not say whether he would send troops.

"We're in the process of determining what is necessary to maintain the cease-fire and to allow for a peaceful transfer of power," Bush said after the meeting.

Bush made his remarks about Liberia at the presidential palace in Dakar, Senegal's capital, before traveling on President Abdoulaye Wade's yacht to Goree Island, where he took the same tour of the island's House of Slaves that President Bill Clinton took five years ago.

A somber Bush -- with first lady Laura Bush and Wade -- briefly toured the slave pens. Its dark rooms, with bars and dirt and stone floors, once imprisoned as many as 200 people at a time. There were cells for men, women, virgins, children and those weighing too little to be sold. A particularly grim chamber for rebellious slaves was only three feet high, with no light.

At the House of Slaves, Bush peered through the Door of No Return, between the slave cells and the Atlantic. Here the bodies of dead slaves were tossed, attracting sharks that also devoured those who tried to escape as they were loaded onto ships.

Bush expressed regret that slavery had been practiced in the United States and noted John Adams's description of slavery as "an evil of colossal magnitude."

"Years of unpunished brutality and bullying and rape produced a dullness and hardness of conscience," he said. "Christian men and women became blind to the clearest commands of their faith and added hypocrisy to injustice."

Bush's address, laden with Christian references, appeared to be geared as much to his domestic audience as to Senegal's 10 million people, of whom 92 percent are Muslim and only 2 percent Christian. He spoke of American slaves finding "a suffering Savior" and referred to other African Americans who found strength in Christianity.

Bush, who won less than 10 percent of the black vote in 2000 but who is eager to broaden his appeal to minorities, also praised the achievements of African Americans, including Frederick Douglass, Booker T. Washington and Martin Luther King Jr. "The spirit of Africans in America did not break," he said, adding that the battle for racial justice "is not over" at home.

In the guest book, Bush scribbled: "With warm regards from America. May God bless those who learn the lessons of history in this important site." "Very moving, very touching," Bush said after he left.

During his six-hour visit to Senegal, Bush was kept from the public by a huge military and security presence. Roads were closed and traffic was rerouted for miles in Dakar, and residents and shopkeepers on Goree Island reported that they were asked to shut their homes and offices.

Bush told the West African leaders privately that fighting terrorism was the reason for his trip, which will take him on to South Africa, Botswana, Uganda and Nigeria. He "emphasized that the best way to fight terror is to support the habits of freedom, and that that was represented in his trip here," an aide said.

In his remarks on Liberia, Bush again called on President Charles Taylor to leave, but did not tie Taylor's departure to U.S. involvement, as he had previously. Bush aides said Taylor's departure was necessary for, but not a precondition of, U.S. involvement. Taylor, who has been charged with crimes against humanity by a U.N.-backed court for his role in neighboring Sierra Leone's brutal civil war, said on Sunday that he would accept Nigeria's offer of asylum but did not say when he would resign.

U.N. Secretary General Kofi Annan, several West African countries, Britain and France have called on the United States to take the lead in a peacekeeping operation in Liberia.

Hundreds of thousands of Liberians have died in a civil war that began in 1989 and continued through several changes of government. Taylor, a former rebel leader who came to power in 1997, also trained and armed a rebel group fighting Sierra Leone's government that became known for cutting off the limbs of civilians, forcing children to become guerrillas and employing rape as a weapon of terror.

Bush said he had assured John Kufuor, president of Ghana and the West African group's leader, that the United States would "participate in the process. And we're now in the process of determining what that means." A U.S. assessment team arrived in Liberia on Monday.

An administration official, briefing reporters on condition of anonymity, said the West African leaders at Bush's meeting "didn't ask for troops" and "didn't raise any specific needs, just the need for general support."

Bush is scheduled to return to Washington on Saturday.

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