

When Mr. Bush 'Came Shopping' in Africa

By Rolake Nwagwu, Treatment Action Movement (TAM)
Nigeria Journalists Against AIDS (JAAIDS) Nigeria
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A journalist asked me what it felt like to shake the hands of the most powerful man in the world, the President of the United States of America, President George Walker Bush.

Man, I have refused to take a bath since Saturday! God forbid that I wash these hands before I get to my bank to withdraw a million naira. Then, I must take these hands of mine to the American embassy on Walter Carrington Crescent to get that almighty American visa, and when I'm asked that question that makes those of us living with HIV uncomfortable, the question that says, "Do you have an infectious disease of public health significance?" I will simply stretch out my right hand and say "I just got a presidential handshake from your president."



Most importantly, I must run on Tuesday morning to the HIV clinic to see my doctor. I can't afford meds because four years ago I was put on a drug trial for six months with no counseling. I couldn't even finish the trial because I had no money to pay, and I was not totally compliant. Now, I need to access drugs but I don't qualify for the first line regimen, as I'm not drug naive. I must have at least N37,000 monthly (\$300) if I'm to start ARV therapy. That being the case, I'll take the hands he shook and the \$15 billion promissory note he gave to the doctor and all my drug needs shall be met. Amen!

The journey to this handshake was hilariously maddening. We were told the issue to be put on the front burner is PMTCT (Prevention of Mother to Child Transmission of HIV/AIDS). The last time I checked, when any group or body claimed to have a PMTCT program, it usually meant VCT (Voluntary Counseling and Testing) + ARV (Anti-retroviral drugs) + infant formula milk. With my dear people, it could mean VCT + referral to the-yet-to-start Nigerian Government Nevirapine (ARV) + 6 months exclusive breast-feeding! This PMTCT initiative needs to be applauded and for that we dressed up, sang and shook hands with Mr. President.

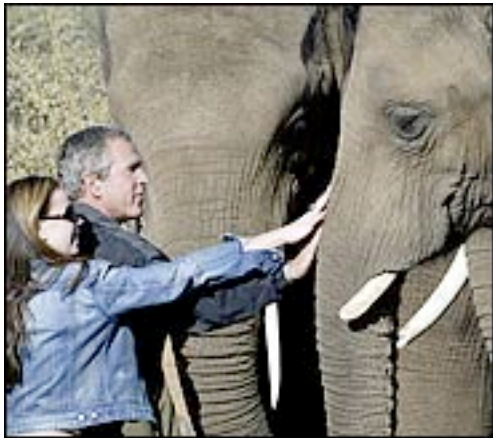
When the opportunity came to table our issues, it was denied us because according to the organizers, there was no time and only five people could talk to him, one of whom was a representative of positive women. The only thing she's expected to do is give her testimonial and get the heck off. She had just two minutes and she had to read a testimonial rather than place our issues on the table.

"What George Bush wants to listen to is your testimonial. He already knows the issue and has heard your voice, which is why he is making this visit. President Bush is not comfortable with speeches and talks." That sounds to me like if all I have is two minutes, he'll rather hear the stigma and pains I have to endure than the issues I expect his visit to address.

Now, Bush has come and gone and I'm left here in Nigeria with USAID. PMTCT is the reason for which we went to Abuja and comprehensive PMTCT program is what we expect. Since Mr. President knows what my issues are and came to Nigeria to address them, I want to see a model USAID PMTCT site that commits to VCT, ARV and infant milk. Anything short of that is a farce and totally unacceptable. The fall out of the Bush visit shouldn't just be the sale of Nigerian gas and growing genetically processed and patented crops like was done in India, otherwise, we'll be tempted to think the President just came a-shopping.

You might ask why the American President should be the one to talk to about my concerns and not my own government. Sadly, there was no Nigerian government delegate who met us with President Bush, but my thinking is that if America says she is committed to fighting AIDS in Africa, then the right things should be done at the right time in the right way. Don't claim to commit to PMTCT if you won't make ARVs available. Don't claim to support Africans using generic drugs if you go on to try enforcing the same laws that will make getting generic drugs almost impossible.

Don't claim to be against stigma and discrimination of PLWHA (People Living with HIV/AIDS) if your staff members still screen their domestic workers for HIV and visa lottery winners are compelled to take HIV tests without their informed knowledge or consent, without voluntary and confidential counseling. When their HIV test results gets to the US embassy first. When they do not get to see the results of tests they paid a fortune for in highbrow hospitals. I wanted to table our issues before the American President because I believe that you must say what you mean and mean what you say.



So, when Bush came shopping in Africa, he talked about America's commitment to fight HIV and AIDS in Africa. He's gone round five beautiful African countries, made promises, ate dinners, watched dances and posed for photographs. The only group that had audience with him was positive women. Neither the Network of People Living with HIV and AIDS in Nigeria (NEPWHAN) nor the Civil Society Consultative Group on HIV/AIDS in Nigeria (CISSGHAN) got an audience. I was ready to take the next flight home when the entire charade was fast turning into a farce, but I figured this was the only opportunity to say my piece, so I dressed up, fell in line, said my piece and came back home.

Thanks President Bush for standing there, listening to us, hearing our voices, talking to us and assuring us that all our concerns will be met and addressed. We look forward to your fulfilling the very many promises you made to us.

Thanks most especially to the 15 most beautiful women in Nigeria and dear Sisi who agreed that we all should individually one-on-one tell President Bush what our concerns are, namely:

1. The lack of funding for the Global Fund
2. Lack of infant milk for our babies
3. Lack of ARVs for our children and us
4. Lack of drugs to treat opportunistic infections
5. Efforts to prevent us from infecting our babies but none to stop these same babies from becoming orphans
6. Making true the commitment of \$15billion promised to Africa
7. Committing to putting pressure on the almighty pharmaceutical companies of the west to bring down the prices of drugs, and
8. Stopping the stigma and discrimination that denies us access to unrestricted travel

I'm however not sorry that I became "the spirit of distraction" who wouldn't allow things run as the powers that be wanted it to, neither am I sorry that I refused to sing and dance for President George Bush.

I almost forgot to add the fact that my beautiful face was seen all over the world on CNN, all over Nigeria on NTA and my flat-mate in South Africa even saw me on SABC! You see comrades from across Africa and all over the world who wrote protest letters, called press conferences and even went on protest marches never got seen nor mentioned on CNN, but we know that they got seen and heard where it matters most: in history, in our hearts and in the world security monitoring devices.

I am looking forward to the recorded hand shake and presidential photographs putting drugs in my body, preventing me from passing this dreaded virus on to my baby and putting the much needed infant milk on my table seeing as I can't breast feed!

Vive PATHAM! (Pan-African HIV/AIDS Treatment Access Movement)

Rolake Nwagwu

Treatment Action Movement (TAM) Nigeria

Email: rolakenwagwu@yahoo.co.uk

also see >>

Tuesday, July 08, 2003 8:44 PM

Bush's visit to Senegal

Dearest friends,

As you probably know, this week George Bush is visiting Africa. Starting with Senegal, he arrived this morning at 7.20 PM and left at 1.30 PM. This visit has been such an ordeal that a petition is being circulated for this Tuesday July 8th be named Dependency Day.

Let me share with you what we have been through since last week.

1 - Arrests : more than 1,500 persons have been arrested and put in jail between Thursday and Monday. Hopefully they will be released now that the Big Man is gone.

2 - The US Army's planes flying day and night over Dakar. The noise they make is so loud that one hardly sleeps at night.

3 - About 700 security people from the US for Bush's security in Senegal, with their dogs, and their cars. Senegalese forces were not allowed to come near the US president.

4 - All trees in places where Bush will pass have been cut. Some of them have more than 100 years.

5 - All roads going down town (where hospitals, businesses, schools are located) were closed from Monday night to Tuesday at 3 PM. This means that we could not go to our offices or schools. Sick people were also obliged to stay at home.

6- National exams for high schools that started on Monday are postponed until Wednesday.

Bush's visit to the Goree Island is another story. As you may know Goree is a small Island facing Dakar where from the 15th to the 19th century, the African slaves to be shipped to America were parked in special houses called slave houses. One of these houses has become a Museum to remind humanity about this dark period and has been visited by kings, queens, presidents. Bill, Hillary and Chelsea Clinton, and before them, Nelson Mandela, the Pope, and

many other distinguished guests or ordinary tourists visited it without bothering the islanders. But for "security reasons" this time, the local population was chased out of their houses from 5 to 12 AM. They were forced by the American security to leave their houses and leave everything open, including their wardrobes to be searched by special dogs brought from the US. The ferry that links the island to Dakar was stopped and offices and businesses closed for the day.

According to an economist who was interviewed by a private radio, Senegal that is a very poor country has lost huge amount of money in this visit, because workers have been prevented from walking out of their homes. In addition to us being prevented to go out, other humiliating things happened also. Not only Bush brought did not want to be with Senegalese but he did not want to use our things. He brought his own armchairs, and of course his own cars, and meals and drinks. He came with his own journalists and ours were forbidden inside the airport and in place he was visiting. Our president was not allowed to make a speech. Only Bush spoke when he was in Goree. He spoke about slavery. It seems that he needs the vote of the African American to be elected in the next elections, and wanted to please them. That's why he visited Goree. Several protest marches against American politics have been organized yesterday and even when Bush was here, but we think he does not care.

We have the feeling that everything has been done to convince us that we are nothing, and that America can behave the way it wants, everywhere, even in our country. Believe me friends, it is a terrible feeling. But according to a Ugandan friend of mine, I should not complain because in Uganda one of the country he is going to visit, Bush does not intend to go out of the airport. He will receive the Ugandan President in the airport lounge.

Nevertheless, I think I am lucky, because I have such wonderful American friends. But there are now thousands of Senegalese who believe that for all Americans the world is their territory.

Love to you all, Codou