

AT ISSUE

Two Continents

Let me tell you a tale of two continents. A short time ago, I helped to negotiate a cease-fire in the worst civil conflict of a harsh decade. I was honored to receive President Clinton's appreciation for working with three international leaders to help bring about this vital step toward peace, while brokering the release of more than 2,000 prisoners. The conflict, which has continued for nearly eight years, has claimed more than 500,000 lives and displaced more than a million refugees. Peace, if it follows, will stop more needless suffering and end the potential destabilizing of a vital region.

Yet, even well-informed Americans have heard little about either the conflict or the cease-fire. That's because the war was in Sierra Leone in Western Africa, and was waged outside the glare of cameras and beyond the eyes of Western journalists. The horrors of the war in Sierra Leone have been worse than those in Kosovo, but the cameras were not there to bring it into our living rooms.

This is the story of two continents—Europe and Africa. In Europe, the graphic coverage of the horrors in Kosovo helped galvanize public concern and move the government to act. The crimes inflicted on the Kosovars are terrible in scope. So the Kosovars have the commitment of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, the attention of the global community, and the promise of the United States and its allies for aid and reconstruction. Congress just appropriated over \$13 billion for the war on Yugoslavia and the support of the Kosovar

refugees. The president has pledged a Marshall Plan for the region to reconstruct what has been destroyed in the fighting. Sierra Leone shares the horrors but not the hope. There is no public outcry against the violence, no commitment for aid to reconstruct the country. The only peacekeeping forces offered were supplied by Africans themselves, with the United States providing only \$15 million to help support their activities in Sierra Leone.

The discrepancy in treatment is noted across the world. The United States undermines the credibility of its humanitarian purpose in Kosovo when it ignores worse crises in Africa. Sierra Leone provided the ancient homelands for many slaves that

were brought primarily to South Carolina, North Carolina, and parts of Georgia. We have as many, if not more, cultural and ethnic ties to Western Africa as we do to the Balkans. And the

conflict there is far more destabilizing than that in Yugoslavia.

Two continents, two tragedies, two treatments. And yet a much smaller investment in attention, resources, and concern in Africa would have a far greater effect in saving lives and providing hope. Let's give peace a chance in Sierra Leone, even as we search for it in the Balkans.

This discrepancy is just one more unintended consequence. We did not intend to reveal, by intervening in Kosovo, while abdicating in other parts of the world, that there are fissures in our own society that have yet to be worked out. But we have revealed them nonetheless.

—Jesse Jackson

This essay is excerpted from the Reverend Jesse Jackson's speech before the Wilson Center's Board of Trustees and the Wilson Council on June 7, 1999. The full text is available online at <http://wwics.si.edu>.