Prompted by the horrific combination of starvation and predatory violence, the West is now intervening in Somalia. But there are many African leaders for whom nothing the West does is enough -- even a massive and dangerous humanitarian effort. For such leaders the West, if it acts at all, acts badly in Africa (or too late), and thereby bears a large share of the responsibility for Africa’s problems. This view is demonstrably wrong.

The rhetoric of victimization and blame was very much on display in late September, when President Abdou Diouf of Senegal addressed the U.N. General Assembly, before Somalia’s condition had reached its current crisis point. Mr. Diouf, who is chairman of the Organization of African Unity, chastised the West for ignoring Africa. He was echoing the sentiments of other African leaders, for whom “marginalization” is the new term of abuse. The abandonment of Africa by the West for Eastern Europe, they all warn, will vastly impede their efforts to alleviate Africa’s squalor. The Clinton administration should ignore these rantings. It is true that the tribulations of Africa and the solicitations of its leaders have at times been greeted with charitable indifference in world councils. But the constant whining of Africa’s leaders now draws cynicism and yawns in Africa itself. The truth is: Africa has been marginalized by African leaders themselves.

While Eastern Europe, Latin America and Southeast Asia have been steadfast in reforming their economies, African leaders have remained laggards, insisting on massive inflows of foreign aid to underwrite almost every reform. Even the devastation of African war -- in Angola, Ethiopia, Mozambique, Namibia and now Somalia -- has not been enough to prompt action within Africa itself. "People are dying in droves daily from bullets and starvation," laments Mahmoud Farra, a Somali refugee in Britain, "yet African leaders are doing nothing to stop the war." How can the world take Africa seriously when its own leaders and elites are not serious about tackling its problems?

After years of mismanagement, most African countries today are poorer than they were when they achieved their independence in the 1960s. This is not a justification for colonialism but a statement of fact. Between 1965 and 1987, the average annual growth rate of gross domestic product per capita was 1.1% for all of Africa and 0.4% for sub-Saharan Africa -- 0.1% if Nigeria is excluded. Between 1986 and 1991 real GDP fell by 0.7% a year (including Arab North Africa, but not South Africa).

The performance of sub-Saharan or black Africa has been the worst in the Third World. Between 1980 and 1989, black Africa’s real GDP per capita contracted by an average of 1.2% while East Asia grew by 6.2% and South Asia by 3%.

According to Africa’s own elites, including such veteran African leaders as Julius Nyerere and Kenneth Kaunda, the causes of Africa’s problems are forever external: Western colonialism and imperialism, the effects of the slave trade, exploitation by multinational corporations, the injustice of the international economic system, inadequate flows of foreign aid -- and now "marginalization."

But a new and angry generation of Africans reject this claptrap and lay greater emphasis on internal factors: misguided leadership, systemic corruption, economic mismanagement, senseless civil wars, tyranny, flagrant violations of human rights and military vandalism.

These internal factors are themselves products of defective economic and political systems established and retained by many African leaders after independence. Most of these systems are characterized by an extreme concentration of economic and political power in the hands of the state -- and ultimately one individual.

In Africa, the state reserves for itself the right to intervene, plan and restructure almost every conceivable aspect of Africa’s economy and society. Socialism may be dead but statism lives in Africa. State hegemony in the economy has now become the
bane of Africa’s development, suffocating and devouring its productive base.

The centralization of economic power in Africa has turned the state into a huge patronage machine and bred elite cronyism. Lucrative state jobs have been parceled out to friends and government largess doled out to loyal supporters. In Africa’s pork-barrel politics, avaricious elites have absconded with the goods, leaving the people to starve.

The labyrinth of controls and regulations instituted by the state have provided ruling elites with the chance for illicit enrichment. To help the unwary navigate the maze of regulations, ministers demand bribes and “commissions.” In many African countries, the World Bank and International Monetary Fund arrived too late. The state treasury had already been “privatized” by the elites.

By concentrating so much political power at the center, the state also became an irresistible prize for which all sorts of groups and individuals compete. Once seized, the instruments of state power are used by these groups and individuals to enrich themselves and further the interests of their own ethnic groups or professional class. All others are excluded.

It is this fight for state power that has been the source of Africa’s inane civil wars and chronic political instability -- not colonialism or Western "exploitation" or "marginalization." In almost all African systems, the peasants, the real people of Africa and producers of its real wealth, have been abused by the state and excluded from the political process.

In many African countries, those who took over the reins of power after independence were worse than the colonialists they replaced. In Somalia, the civilian administration that assumed power in 1960 was hopelessly corrupt and incompetent. It was overthrown in a coup (in October 1969) by Major General Mohammed Siad Barre, who adopted socialism along with the designation "Jalle" or "Comrade." Government was centralized under a Supreme Revolutionary Council and Somalia turned to the Soviet Union for tutelage.

By 1979, the economy was in tatters. Socialist policies had failed to engineer economic development, and foreign loans and credits only earned Somalia the title "The Graveyard of Aid." For two decades, 1965-87, GDP per capita grew at a miserable 0.3% annual rate, and food production per capita declined an average of 2% per year from 1975 to 1985.

An increasingly unpopular and corrupt Barre regime resorted to brutal force to remain in power. Torture, mass executions and pillage were the order of the day. Entire regions were devastated by a regime in combat with its own people. The "liberators" who drove Barre out in January 1991 were little better, fighting among themselves and causing further carnage.

Sadly, Somalia is not the exception. Angola, Liberia, Mozambique, Sudan, Uganda and Zaire now lay in ruins. More distressing, many other African countries are heading down the same path of corruption and self-destruction.

Libya, for example, ought to have one of the highest per capita incomes in the world, with a population of only four million and vast oil wealth estimated at $10 billion in 1990. But mismanagement, foreign exploits and corruption have so eroded the country's economic base that Libya sometimes defaults on its foreign bills and some government employees go unpaid for months.

In Algeria a former prime minister, Abdelhamid Brahimi, said recently that officials of the ruling Front de Liberation National had pocketed $26 billion in bribes and commissions on foreign contracts. The current prime minister called the charge "grossly exaggerated" but did not deny its gist.

In Sierra Leone a special commission recently detailed how the ruling elites have plundered that country's resources with impunity. Former Inspector General of Police James Bambay Kamara, for example, owns 37 pieces of land, with the most expensive valued at 7.5 million leones (the country's unit of currency), while his salary is about 182 leones a year. His three bank accounts include one in London.
Under various programs, the World Bank, IMF and other international agencies have been nudging African governments toward reform. But the commitment to genuine reform within Africa itself has been supercilious and slow. Freeloaders and patronage junkies fiercely resist a dismantling of the statist behemoth. In 1990, the former deputy agriculture minister in Sierra Leone told the BBC's "Focus on Africa" program that he "won't give up his present privileged position for the sake of a multiparty system." And why should he, or any other corrupt official on the receiving end of Western largess? Such ministers oversee the disbursement of over $12 billion in annual foreign aid.

One solution is to take power away from the center, or the state, and give it back to the people (decentralization). Another is to monitor foreign aid much more closely, or to direct it only where free-market reform is a visible reality. The best solution, however, may have been expressed by Amina Ramadou, a Zairean peasant woman. "We send three sacks of angry bees to the governor and the president, and some ants which bite," she suggested. "Maybe they eat the government and solve our problems."

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