

Patrick R.D. Hayford, Director of Office of the Special Advisor on Africa, United Nations
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by Jane Schneider

Recent political uprisings in Egypt and Libya have been making news headlines and thrusting Africa once again into the international spotlight. Although Patrick R.D. Hayford, a career diplomat and Director of Office of the Special Advisor on Africa, United Nations, spoke indirectly of the nascent democracy movements erupting in North Africa, his recent lecture for the Economic Club of Memphis did provide a single message regarding Africa: Change.

Hayford's core message was driven home again and again during his February 17th, presentation at the Holiday Inn on the University of Memphis campus. There, he implored audience members to rethink their image of Africa as a continent plagued with health and humanitarian crises to one of becoming a rising player on the world stage. Change is afoot, he said. He pointed to the region's relative political stability, to a sustained economic growth of 5 percent annum, and to a gradually improving infrastructure as positive signs that the African diaspora, comprised of 54 countries and 1 billion people, is beginning to move forward after weathering years of unrest due to AIDS, famine, and warfare.

Hayford has long had his focus trained on Africa. In his current position, he assists the Secretary-General in improving coherence and coordination of the UN system support to Africa. Prior to his current U.N position, which he has held since 2006, he served as the director for African Affairs in the Executive Office of the U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan from 1999 to 2005. He completed 33 years as a diplomat in Ghana's Foreign Service, where his tours of duty included New York, Egypt, the United Kingdom, and South Africa.

His broadbrushed discussion touched on themes that impact business investment in Africa today: Trade issues, health concerns, and political stability. The AIDS pandemic has clearly left its mark on the continent, where the disease first broke out before spreading around the globe during the 1980s. A staggering 45 percent of Africa's population is now under the age of 18, which means government leaders will have a burgeoning labor force to educate.

In addition to labor, however, Africa has also always been a region rich in natural resources, potential that still remains largely untapped. Currently, fifteen to 17 percent of the world's crude oil comes from Africa, though with more than \$60 billion being spent on oil exploration that figure is expected to more than double to 45 percent by 2020, said Hayford. Ores, minerals, and botanicals are mined or grown here for export, including 90 percent of the world's cobalt (from the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Zambia), 40 percent of the world's gold, 70 percent of the world's cocoa, 60 percent of the world's coffee beans, platinum, bauxite — products that play an important role in world trade.

“The strategic picture for U.S. relations to Africa has changed. It's become more important as a business trading partner. The U.S. now does more trade with Africa than all of the countries of the former U.S.S.R.,” Hayford pointed out. “Several years ago, there was war in 15 African countries, but those have come to an end and there are more democratic efforts at work. Angola and Sierra Leone are at peace. Such major improvements on the political front have facilitated vast improvements on the economic front. In spite of AIDS and challenges in the Sudan, by-in-large, Africa has achieved significant gains.”

While he touched briefly on the overall political climate of North Africa, Hayford offered little in the way of insights into the current political struggles in Egypt and Libya. “No one was surprised by what happened in Egypt,” he said, recognizing that country's sizable and fairly affluent middle class. “These are a sophisticated people who will find their way forward.”

I think in the long run, Egypt will end up in a better place. I think the more people demand their rights, the more they will demand that government be more accountable. They will discover that freedom is intoxicating.”

Hayford also briefly cited the recent Tunisian revolt, which sparked riots and demonstrations across that North African nation in response to political and social issues that had long been festering. For 23 years, the nation had been under the tight authoritarian regime of President Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali, who was ousted from office. While his rule was an oppressive one filled with corruption, the country had prospered with steady economic development that “other countries could emulate,” said Hayford. For now, Tunisia's future has become clouded as political factions work to cobble together a new form of government.

Hayford acknowledged the challenges Tunisia and its African neighbors must face head-on for the current change to grow. “Africa must take responsibility for its future. It must tackle corruption. It must take care of its youth. It must give more support to women. It must build a better future for its people.”

That future would improve significantly with better communications and transportation. Currently, Africa is receiving assistance in that arena from China, which is eager to provide capital and resources in exchange for access to the natural resources it needs. Due to Africa's early colonial development, which often emphasized moving goods from the interior outward from individual nations, much of the continent has lacked the infrastructure necessary to make transport and trade easier from country to country. Now, with a significant infusion of capital coming from China, that reality could slowly be changing. And with it, Hayford hopes, will also come more cross-border trade.

“The Chinese are helping to lay infrastructure of telecommunication lines and roads to connect Africa to the rest of the world,” he confirmed. In addition to improving its physical infrastructure, it will be necessary for Africa to also improve its court system, which would help facilitate a more productive business climate.

“Please, as business people, look at Africa and see that there are interesting possible rates of return on investment. Don't think of Africa as stereotyped. See it in a more nuanced way,” he said.

“I sense that U.S. and African relations need to be looked at through a new lens. It can no longer be based on the fact that 10 percent of Americans originally came from here or because of humanitarian efforts by the U.S. See Africa in a new way.”