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Blair charity ‘eclipses Britain in Rwanda’



Tony Blair in Kigali last year with the Rwandan president, Paul Kagame Chip Somodevilla/Getty Images

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Tony Blair has been accused of undermining British foreign policy by embedding his charity at the heart of the Rwandan regime, with a budget matching that of the British high commission.

Mr Blair’s organisation, the Africa Governance Initiative, has been bankrolled indirectly by the millionaire businessman Lord Sainsbury of Turville.

Observers warned that the scale of the former prime minister’s private diplomacy challenged the influence of the foreign office and risked impairing the national interest in the Commonwealth country.

The full extent of Mr Blair’s mission in Rwanda, where President Kagame has been blamed for human rights breaches at home and atrocities in the neighbouring Democratic Republic of Congo, was disclosed to *The Times* under the Freedom of Information Act.

One telegram from the high commissioner, Nicholas Cannon, had the headline “Blair Project”. In November 2010 Mr Cannon wrote: “This is Mr Blair’s sixth visit since February 2008 (he never visited as prime minister). This tiny and remote country has found itself the test bed for the unprecedented phenomenon of the activist former prime minister, and it may be interesting to take stock of [our] impressions.

“The ‘Africa Governance Initiative’ team are well embedded in government institutions here. They currently have a dozen staff (cf [compared with] four UK-based in the high commission) working in the offices of the president and prime minister, the Rwandan Development Board and the ministry for the public service. Their budget, supplied by Lord Sainsbury, is equivalent to that of the high commission.”

Accounts for Lord Sainsbury’s Gatsby Charitable Foundation show it donated £1 million to the Africa Governance Initiative (AGI) in 2010. The AGI says that it is supporting the systems and structures of effective government in Rwanda so that the lives of five million Rwandans who live in poverty can be improved.

A clash between Mr Blair and British policy occurred when the UK withdrew aid in response to a United Nations investigation that blamed Rwanda for fomenting civil war in Congo. Mr Blair publicly declared that Rwanda strongly denied the UN allegations and demanded that aid be restored.

Antony Best, associate professor of international history at the London School of Economics, said that he knew of no British precedent for Mr Blair's activities. "It's distinctly awkward," he said. "The foreign office has very good reasons for saying 'We want to have a monopoly of advice'."

Dr Best explained that the foreign office had to think more widely than just Rwanda to maintain Britain's regional influence. "It makes it difficult. I can imagine there would be people in Whitehall who would resent it."

Sir David Amess, the Conservative MP for Southend West, said that the size of Mr Blair's Rwanda operation was "perverse beyond belief". He added: "He is undermining the British government's policy quite clearly in Rwanda."

A charity partly funded by Lord Sainsbury's Gatsby foundation won control of two tea plantations in a privatisation auction carried out by the Rwanda Development Board in 2012.

Rwanda Tea Investments, created by Gatsby in partnership with the Scottish oil billionaire Sir Ian Wood's philanthropic Wood Foundation, paid nearly £6 million for the government's stake in the tea businesses. The new British owners have pledged to improve management and then transfer ownership to the tea farmers free of charge.

Before the bidding process was completed, Lord Sainsbury met the Rwanda agriculture ministry and discussed supporting tea farmers.

Mr Blair's charity said: "Our small team continues to work alongside the government of Rwanda to sustain the country's impressive poverty reduction record."

A source close to Mr Blair said he had met the High Commission in Rwanda many times "to hear their views".
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Poor quality journalism. Watch out Rwanda.

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I think this story has it the wrong way round. Rather than being an attack on Blair's charity it should be highlighting the new depths that the UK now plumbs thanks to years of underinvestment and powerstripping by Westminster. This country used to have a foreign office and foreign policy worth the name. Now we languish at the back of the queue begging for favours. We should not be surprised if others, be they nations states or alternative sources of power, step in to fill the vacuum.

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I might start a new political party promising a policy the ban Blair.

Should win lots of votes if I also offer to eliminate any opposition.

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This regime has a reputation for knocking off their opponents and, of course, the other issues noted in the article. He should leave Blair and Sainsbury to it.

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"Mr Blair's charity said: Our small team continues to work alongside the government of Rwanda to sustain the country's impressive poverty reduction record."

If they have such an impressive record, wouldn't the charity's time and money be better spent somewhere else

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[ousiniac](#) Mr Blair's charity said: Our small team continues to work alongside the government of Rwanda to sustain the country's impressive poverty reduction record.

What this means is they are helping the president get rid of the poor, as he has done to all his detractors no matter where they are..

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