A man waits at a mosque in Monrovia for his rice ration. It is hoped Mr Clinton's visit signals a new US focus on the problems of countries such as Liberia

African markets shape Clinton's itinerary

Alex Duval Smith in Johannesburg on the president's visit to a continent reborn as a trading partner

BILL CLINTON'S six-nation tour of Africa next week — the first by a serving United States president for almost 20 years — will reward good book-balancers and strategic friends. But it will also lay bare mixed African feelings about the extent to which fragile economies can live up to Washington's expectations.

Last week 16 West African foreign affairs ministers, meeting in the Ivory Coast, resolved that Ecomog — the Nigerian-led force which ousted the military junta in Sierra Leone — should become the region's permanent peace-keeping force.

The hard-won decision was a signal to the US, Britain and France — which like the idea of hands-on input in African peacekeeping without the messy business of providing troops — that at least part of the continent can police itself.

At the same time, Washington sent back the message — through a House of Representatives vote on measures to encourage trade with Africa — that it has its eye on 700 million potential consumers.

As Susan Rice, the US assistant secretary of state for African affairs, said: "Africans are taking their seats at the global economic table and arriving with hardy appetites for lucrative commercial dealings."

President Clinton claims that his 12-day visit to Ghana, Uganda, Rwanda (for a brief stopover), South Africa, Botswana and Senegal is about "delivering the message that the US stands ready to be a partner in Africa's prosperity".

He will signal to the US, and especially African Americans, that there is more to this continent than starvation, drought and war. Hillary and Chelsea will add a human touch, joining him on visits to upbeat development projects, successful Aids campaigns and women's groups.

That the famine-ridden Africans of the cold war years have been reinvented as trading partners grates somewhat with the likes of President Nelson Mandela of South Africa. His country, unavoidable for President Clinton because of its economic might, is also the American's most sceptical host.

In his new year speech at Mafikeng, President Mandela pulled no punches in his condemnation of what he called America's "ambitious and extensive" aid-for-trade agenda and the debt noose in which the Western world holds Africa. On the other hand, the deputy president, Thabo Mbeki, is known as an economic realist who will lend a ready ear to the US president.

> 'Africans are taking their seats at the global economic table with hardy appetites'

Although it detracts from his feel-good agenda, President Clinton decided two days ago that a stop-off in Kigali, the Rwandan capital, was unavoidable. He will "address the gross genocide and violence that has so disrupted Central Africa", said the presidential spokesman, Mike McCurry.

Senegal will provide Mr Clinton with an opportunity to address slavery — and possibly to apologise for it — but it is also a Francophone country looking for new partners.

France has recently disbanded its colonial "co-operation ministry" and announced military cutbacks in Africa. Its former West African colonies fear for their single currency, the CFA, which is pegged to the franc and faces an uncertain future after the introduction of the euro.

Uganda, where President Clinton will meet heads of state from 10 Central African countries on March 25, is one of the darlings of development economists and has a good human rights record. It meets the good governance criteria of the Growth and Opportunity Bill — the trade plan passed by the House of Representatives last week.

Another top pupil on the itinerary is Botswana, recently rated third by a Harvard study which listed African countries according to good governance and competition. It has gone from being among the world's 20 poorest countries at independence in 1966 to being described as an "upper middle income" country by the World Bank. Diamonds are its secret.

Ghana has textbook qualities among cash-crop economies, cocoa being its mainstay. Having had one of the strongest economies at independence in 1957, it went into free-fall only to re-establish fiscal control and engage in a privatisation programme. Fact sheets handed to accompanying journalists are likely to feature an impressive graph showing declining inflation — from more than 100 per cent in 1983 to almost single figures today.

While most observers can see why President Clinton has selected each of his hosts, there is some criticism of his lack of a human rights agenda and the fact that Rwanda was an afterthought. But most agree that his visit is good news for Africa.

Steven Friedman, director of the South African Centre For Policy Studies, said: "Few people expect new factories to spring up just because President Clinton has dropped by. But there is a pretty broad consensus that Africa needs investment and that we are now a continent divided not by superpowers but between super business."

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Greece leaves UK in euro isolation

Martin Walker in Brussels

BRITAIN and Sweden were left on the sidelines of the European monetary system over the weekend when Greece took the drachma back into the exchange rate mechanism, a significant step towards joining the single currency in 2001.

The price was a 14 per cent devaluation against a basket of European currencies, which will make Greece a cheaper destination for British tourists this summer. At a meeting in Brussels, the European Union's monetary committee also agreed to revalue the Irish punt by 3 per cent.

The decision puts Greece — one of Europe's most troubled economies — on track to become the 12th member of the euro zone, leaving only sterling and the Swedish kroner outside the ERM. Maastricht rules require currencies to be part of the exchange rate system for two years prior to qualifying for full monetary union.

The monetary committee meeting in Brussels was the last opportunity for currency adjustments before the European Commission gives its verdict next week on which countries qualify to join the single currency.

"The drachma's new central exchange rate and the supportive package announced by the government should provide a sustainable basis for the government's commitment to join EMU as from 2001," said the International Monetary Fund managing director, Michel Camdessus, yesterday, in an important signal of approval for Greek entry.

The weekend devaluation was inevitable after the drachma became a target for speculators in the foreign exchange markets on Friday, when rumours started circulating about the decision to move back into the ERM. Most analysts believe the drachma is significantly overvalued as a result of the government's tough anti-inflation drive.

The currency readjustments provided ammunition to both sides in the euro debate. Only Britain and Sweden now remain outside the Exchange Rate Mechanism, and EU officials noted last night that Britain, Sweden and Denmark seem increasingly like "a remote northern fringe" to the euro block, whose birth is only six weeks away.

Ireland's decision to revalue the punt, imposed by the country's soaring growth rates, may be another straw in the wind. The EU statement noted that the revaluation "will support the authorities in their efforts to keep the Irish economy on a path of sustainable growth with price stability". It also signals that Dublin's financial policies are defined by Europe now, and not by the City of London.

The bold Greek move could strengthen the arguments of EMU sceptics in Germany and Holland, however. The prospect of bringing in the drachma, on top of worries about importing the weaknesses of the Italian lira, suggest that the new European Central Bank will have to be very orthodox to persuade markets that the euro will be a strong currency.

"One thing is clear. The central bank must aggressively defend the drachma on Monday," warned Harris Makkas, treasurer of the Bank of America in Greece.

The fate of the drachma is likely to depend on economic reforms to be unveiled today by finance minister Yannos Papandoniou. They are expected to include more privatisation, limits on wage rises, and measures to liberalise the labour market and control the rising costs of social security.

The reforms are aimed at cutting the inflation and debt levels which have so far kept Greece outside the criteria for joining the euro.