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25 June, 2003

"Africa's Woes at the Turn of the Century"

Africa has long been on the fringes of the industrialized world's field of vision. When a recent earthquake caused devastation in northern Africa, many Africans were quick to complain that little outside help was forthcoming. The state of Rwanda suffered a devastating period of genocide in 1994 despite multiple warnings to the United Nations by its field people regarding the impending disaster. The Democratic Republic of Congo has suffered a civil war since 1998 that has seen between 3.3 and 4.7 million people killed. Fighting in the Côte d'Ivoire has been ongoing and bloody since the introduction of a racially bigoted public policy dubbed locally as "black Nazism." Ethnic unrest in several central African states across the equatorial region is rife. Renewed crop failure and drought currently place some 40 million people in the shadow of devastating famine. Twelve percent of the world's population lives in Africa and bears 80 percent of its AIDS victims. Draconian rule in Zimbabwe by reputedly one of the most vicious of the world's leaders threatens stability and the lives of the white population. An ongoing and thriving business in slavery is gripping Sudan.

The list of African nightmares is seemingly endless. For fifty or so years, billions of dollars of aid have been poured into Africa, but it has long been recognized that for a variety of reasons most of the money has done little permanent good. Some was siphoned off by unscrupulous rulers or middlemen, some was used to buy guns instead of bread, some was simply used to put small band-aids on gaping wounds. Most of what actually reached its intended recipients was spent on immediate needs rather than building against these recurring nightmares, and much was used to feebly fight against the onslaught of international monetary programs that financially enslave the Africans.

The Africans themselves seem powerless to stop the endless cycle of bad government that many of its countries suffer at the hands of military or corporate powerbrokers, and the natural disasters they suffer seem to recur with hideous frequency. Nevertheless, the largest problem appears to be the indifference of the rest of the world and the apparently deliberate actions by some to keep Africa on its knees.

Africa's woes can be blamed on five things: the first, the weather, is largely beyond anyone's control, although the results of the weather can be mitigated to some extent. Of the rest -- the United Nations, the G8, the international monetary community, and the Africans themselves -- all can be cured, but the international will to make it happen is lacking:

The United Nations

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Africa

Asia

Central Asia

Europe

Latin America

Middle East

Russia

United States

Reviewing only the last decade, we are reminded of the genocidal massacres in Rwanda which occurred while the United Nations stood by. The U.N. leadership on the ground in Africa had pleaded with officials in New York for greater assistance because they could see clearly what was looming; they were met with indifference. It is not lost on Africans that the man in New York who turned a deaf ear to their cries was none other than Kofi Annan, current Secretary General of the U.N. The U.N. is now rattling its sabers at several countries in central Africa and warning them to behave even though there will be no repercussions if they refuse. The U.N. is also intervening in an extraordinarily weak-willed way in the Democratic Republic of Congo -- while the mandate of its international force of peacekeepers is said to be the protection of local citizens, it has tied the hands of the troops so that the achievement of peace is doomed; local citizens fear the real mandate is actually the protection of U.N. employees.

Another weak spot for the U.N. is the resolution accepted just this past week that war crimes committed by peacekeepers will not be subject to punishment. While several African countries have themselves expressed the intent to pursue and prosecute those responsible for war crimes in the fighting of the past few years, they are not comforted in knowing that the people sent to help and protect them have carte blanche to act in any way they see fit without fear of repercussion.

The G8

The G8 countries gathered in the beautiful Canadian resort town of Kananaskis in June 2002 to discuss a variety of issues. Canada's Prime Minister had lobbied long and hard to put Africa on the agenda, in keeping with Canada's admirable efforts to end Apartheid in South Africa and, perhaps, to expiate its sins in Somalia.

Even though Africans themselves were allowed to attend and they presented their New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD), their presence was purely symbolic. U.S. President George W. Bush had only the single-minded issue of his "war on terrorism" to discuss and, in the end, the G8 Summit produced a document entitled "G8 Africa Action Plan." Its stated goals were:

- Promoting Peace and Security
- Strengthening Institutions and Governance
- Fostering Trade, Investment, Economic Growth and Sustainable Development
- Implementing Debt Relief
- Expanding Knowledge: Improving and Promoting Education and Expanding Digital Opportunities
- Improving Health and Confronting HIV/AIDS
- Increasing Agricultural Productivity
- Improving Water Resource Management

A year later, at Evian France, the group met again to revisit the issue and produced a report entitled "Action Against Famine, Especially in Africa: A G8 Action Plan." Unfortunately, there is almost no evidence that any of the goals of the 2002 plan were reached or even initiated, and most Africans would suspect that the 2003 plan will be just as successful.

It is also not in the interests of Africa that economic subsidies provided to farmers in Europe and North America virtually eliminate any hope of Africans producing sufficient food. The Europeans and North Americans, particularly the United States, are guilty of dumping subsidized produce at costs far below the local production costs -- Africans simply cannot compete.

The International Monetary Community

Like many developing parts of the world, Africa has seemingly signed away any hope of economic recovery to groups like the International Monetary Fund (IMF). On the surface, these groups represent sources of capital for developing nations, but the money usually comes with prerequisites about where and how it can be spent, who the vendor companies or nations must be, and what projects are acceptable. A classic example is the loans from the IMF, which allow for the building of potable water infrastructure; usually, these come with the proviso that the water must be privatized. The local people have little control over this most precious commodity, and the corporations are left free to charge as and what they wish.

Most of the developing countries are so far in debt to organizations such as the IMF and the World Bank that there is virtually no way they can ever hope to repay what is owed. It is for this reason that whenever assistance is discussed, debt forgiveness is usually one of the first topics raised. It is not in the interests of the lenders, however, to forgive these debts, and the lenders have very deep pockets and very tight grips on the affluent countries that might otherwise be disposed to help.

There are many multinational corporations and corporate cartels that extract the resources of the African countries; and across the fertile equatorial regions, those resources are immense. In many cases, the local governments skim from the top while allowing these corporations to run their businesses with what can only be described as slavery. The corporate behemoths come from a variety of countries, including many that are usually thought to be sympathetic to the poor and downtrodden.

The Africans

Finally, the Africans themselves are an integral part of a complex problem. But oppressive governments cannot be overthrown by a population that is starving, cannot access modern weapons, is prevented from organizing, and has known nothing but oppression for hundreds of years.

Report Drafted By:
Paul Harris

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