

Independent Commission on International Humanitarian Issues
 Commission Indépendante sur les Questions Humanitaires Internationales

ICHI

Phone : (022) 31 64 00
 Telex : 28.736 ICHI - CH

RSP DOCUMENTATION
 CENTRE

Secretariat:
 47bis, avenue Blanc
 CH 1202 Geneva - Switzerland

COMMUNIQUE (Situation in Africa)

ICHI PLENARY MEETING
 (Tunisia, May 1984)

At the meeting in Tunisia of the Independent Commission on International Humanitarian Issues — its first plenary session in Africa — Prime Minister Mzali, a member of the Commission, said in his opening statement that the African continent, the cradle of the first human beings on earth, has now fallen prey to a series of disastrous calamities. There was a serious risk that the much desired development would be overtaken by ruination.

Profound concern was expressed at the meeting for the humanitarian consequences of the grave crisis unfolding on the African continent. The magnitude of the crisis demands the most urgent response from the international community to buttress the efforts of all African governments in seeking solutions to the crisis and in combating its dire consequences.

The extent of the problem is such that hardly a country on the continent has been left untouched by the cycle of poverty, hunger, disease and degradation of the environment. It is estimated that in 1984 five million infants alone will die in Africa.

The humanitarian crisis in Africa does not stem from a single cause, nor are its solutions to be found in a simple formula. Its roots lie in a complex interaction between external and internal forces. The international economic environment has severely, and in some cases decisively, compounded Africa's poverty and neutralised much of the development efforts made by African governments and peoples over the last three decades. High energy prices, high interest rates, declining terms of trade, growing protectionism and debilitating debt burdens have diminished the resilience of African economies. Exacerbating Africa's present precarious situation is the immediate threat to the IDA's funds and relevant programmes of the World Bank on which Africa's poorest countries rely — a threat resulting directly from the policies adopted by some of the richest countries. The predicament faced by the IDA is a major and unwarranted blow to Africa at a time of its greatest need. Similarly, IMF policies have been insensitive to Africa's current financial problems, most of which stem from factors far beyond the control of African governments.

./.

Ultimately, only Africans can devise solutions for the problems of Africa. Dissension within and among African states has generated massive humanitarian problems directly, and indirectly through its negative impact of development efforts. Response to, or preparation for, armed conflicts has led to a disproportionate investment of scarce resources in armaments. The best interests of African peoples also demand a forthright approach to internal problems of economic mismanagement and corruption. An improvement in the current situation depends on a determined strategy, pioneered by Africans for Africans and supported by the international community, to combat poverty.

Our sense of common humanity demands the recognition that the daunting problems faced by Africa are not Africa's alone — whether in their making, their implications, or in the solutions that must be found to them. They are problems which Africa shares with the world. Global co-operation in meeting them is not peripheral but central to the survival of millions of human beings, and is also a test of international commitment to humanitarian values.

The Commission is acutely conscious of the colossal problems being faced by many countries due to the massive movements of populations, refugees and displaced persons as well as the problems of armed conflicts in many areas. However, at this stage of its work, the Commission has concentrated primarily on basic needs and the effects of drought and desertification on African life. Our conclusions are at once grave and serious.

We have noted that continuous and widespread drought, exacerbated by the mismanagement of the range ecology, has ensured that virtually the whole of Africa is engaged in a struggle for survival. Rainfall in parts of Western Africa is at its lowest point for half a century. Drought is now a permanent feature in some countries as they enter their tenth year without rain.

Acute food shortages are endemic in half the countries of Africa. Over 150 million people face mass starvation and an accelerating decline in their standard of living. Food production per person has fallen on average by 11%, since 1970. As economies continue to deteriorate, hunger and malnutrition become endemic.

Extensive bush fires have accompanied the drought in many areas. These destroy not only people's homes and villages, but irreplaceable plants, trees and animals — that is, the inherited genetic stock of a region — adding a serious ecological twist to the disaster. The loss of African top soil is more serious than anywhere else in the world, and in West Africa has led already to a reduction in corn yields of 52%, and in legumes of 38%.

Moreover, in some areas savage flooding, following drought, has devastated remaining crops and destroyed the local infrastructure. Thousands of families have been uprooted as a consequence.

The vicious, downward spiral thus unleashed is accelerating. Shortly it could be out of control. The strain created accelerates the collapse of traditional societies.

Food and water remain key components for all African communities. But for many farmers, seeds for the 1984 harvest have already been eaten, as the only means to immediate survival. Where seeds are available, they are often beyond the purchasing power of the farmer; available funds for fertilizers, well-digging, agricultural production and animal husbandry are no longer adequate; people are migrating from drought stricken areas to overcrowded camps, villages or towns in adjacent areas, regardless of national boundaries, or the inability of the area to cope with the massive influx of new populations. The status and future of these people remain unclear.

The hardship being endured is at high human cost. It has been estimated that five million infants alone will die in Africa in 1984. Physically and mentally, millions of African children will be adversely affected, for life, as a result of their experience over the last 5 years. For those who have survived, genetic changes resulting from malnutrition in pre and immediate post natal babies, may be passed on, through the female child, to the unborn of the future.

At most, only a quarter of the people of Africa have access to safe drinking water, so that water-borne diseases continue to afflict the majority. Even fewer people have access to preventative health care programmes, resulting in malnutrition, high infant mortality and low life expectancy.

As if these afflictions were not enough to debilitate the most resilient of societies, stagnant economies and high population growth, including the highest fertility rate in the world, ensure that per capita income is less now than it was ten years ago, in many of Africa's poorer countries.

In parts of Africa only half the urban labour force is employed and in the last five years trade has declined by some 50%. The inevitable loss of foreign earnings, is equivalent to the total aid received by the continent — the one making a mockery of the other. The fall in commodity prices is little short of calamitous whilst the cost of servicing debt, last year, south of the Sahara, is estimated to have increased by 60%. Elsewhere, increases in excess of 25% are not unusual. 1984 will see a further deterioration of present trends.

Meanwhile, armed conflicts and violence, in certain parts of Africa, add unnecessary bloodshed and turmoil to a tragic situation. Indeed the spread of militarism throughout the continent, and disproportionate spending by many African governments on armaments and sophisticated defence systems, constantly drain scarce resources from human development. Priority is given to weapons of destruction, when people need hoes and seeds to grow food, clean water to drink and simple, low cost preventive health programmes. Militarism is perpetuated and costly armies maintained, when the priority should be economic and political stability based on a harmonious, self-reliant population.

All of this represents an immense humanitarian challenge of global proportions. People are forced into sub-human conditions to secure minimum survival levels. Frequently they fail and die. Can the rest of the world simply stand by, watching on its television screens, an entire continent collapse, economically and ecologically, and within a social environment which embraces such widespread human suffering?

* * * *

We call on the world community to co-operate with the people of Africa and their governments to undertake the following measures which we offer as some of the paths towards development:-

SHORT-TERM:

- a) Carefully controlled and managed food aid, where applicable, with a predetermined and finite life span, should be sent to the most stricken areas immediately. Such relief programmes should be designed to encourage development and not dampen local food production. The cost of transporting food aid is beyond the capacity of many African governments, especially the land-locked Least Developed Countries. It is essential, therefore, that donor agencies bear these costs themselves, together with the costs of setting up strategically placed local food storage depots. These will need, in turn, to be supported by depots for spare parts, and fuel for trucks, trains and other means of mechanical transport. There is evidence that the suffering of the people, and the steady rise in death from starvation, is aggravated by the closure, or erratic use of key roads, railways or port facilities. Our common humanity demands that all such facilities should be opened to ease the flow of aid and trade.
- b) The provision of improved pricing structures and additional credit facilities to small scale farmers to enable them to buy good quality seeds, tools and fertilizers, and to improve the management of local water and irrigation schemes.

- c) The debts owed by most African countries, though small in absolute terms, impose on them burdens as onerous in terms of their own economies, as those of the major debtor countries. This problem demands the most urgent consideration by the international financial community.
- d) Oil producing countries should take the initiative in negotiating a minimum 5 year agreement to supply oil at special prices advantageous to the 24 worst hit countries of Africa.

LONG-TERM:

- a) In co-operation with the research institutions of the Consultative Group on International Agriculture Research, a comprehensive African cereal, vegetable and fruit gene bank should be established on the Continent as a major facility so that the rich genetic diversity in Africa, including wild species, can be stored, classified and regenerated true to type, for use primarily by African plant breeders, but linked to world conservation strategies through the international data bank system of F.A.O. and the global policies of the "International Board of Plant Genetic Resources".
- b) Anti-desertification plans, based on small scale, community orientated, social development schemes, should be implemented on a regional basis. Africans have successfully implemented many agroforestry tree and crop programmes, as well as effective micro catchment water projects, particularly in the Upper Volta, Niger, Algeria, Morocco and Senegal. These should be studied and replicated systematically, as feasible, across the continent.
- c) In respect of the critical loss of top soil, African governments should commission regionally based research to:
 - (i) Quantify and evaluate loss of top soil and the cost effect of this on food production, and the silting up of rivers, deltas and harbours.
 - (ii) Study and introduce where applicable techniques of minimum tillage, together with contour farming, agroforestry and other well established anti-desertification techniques.
 - (iii) In cooperation with the International Council for Research in Agroforestry, establish regional centres for applied research into agroforestry and tree cropping applicable to given geographical territories.

Whilst many Africans in the past, had learned to live in harmony with their natural habitat, no effective measures have been taken by governments to make their people aware of the long-term cost to a nation's

economy of the loss of top soil, or the direct link between reduced productivity and soil erosion. What is at stake here is not merely the degradation of the soil — but the degradation of life itself.

- d) Tree planting should be a national priority in every African country. School children, university undergraduates and similar groups including the army could co-operate in maintaining the momentum. Support from the specialised agencies of the U.N., the World Bank and NGOs, is essential if funding and specialised techniques are to be used to optimum advantage. Extension services at village level should feature prominently in regional strategies, with ownership of the trees clearly falling to village people.
- e) Preventive health care schemes, also should be a priority for all countries. The links between nutrition, sanitation, hygiene, clean water and health, should be taught to people at village level. U.N. and NGO donor agencies have a major supporting role to play in encouraging this development.
- f) More attention and support to production, storage and marketing of food for local consumption, long term pricing policies, designed to encourage production, should be studied and implemented. Increased resources should be dedicated to agricultural research and to the provision of the necessary infrastructure to support increased food production. Emphasis on mono culture, production for export markets and energy intensive cultivation must be carefully considered in the light of local consumption patterns and needs.
- g) Finally, but most importantly, people must be party to resolving their own problems and help in the process of designing the schemes which will lead to their resolution. Self-reliance cannot be imposed from the top, but leadership can ensure that the innate skills, knowledge and resilience of the people are harnessed to combat the causes of poverty. This will not become a dynamic process across the face of Africa unless literacy levels are raised dramatically. Mass literacy campaigns at village level, which aim to motivate rural communities to understand their key role in maintaining a balanced range ecology, and drawing on traditional African methods, are essential.

* * * * *

Although the scope of the humanitarian issues to be addressed specifically by the Independent Commission is relatively limited and will not include a detailed report on the situation in Africa,

we felt that, at our first plenary meeting in this Continent, it would be useful to share our thoughts and concerns regarding the overall situation in the hope that they would be helpful to future national and regional planning. Our statement is not intended to be a comprehensive analysis of all the problems faced by Africans today, nor of possible solutions to them.

* * * * *