

States of mind clash at EU-Africa summit

by Hussein Al-Nadeem

“I tell him: It’s a bull! He tells me: Milk it!”

— *Kurdish saying*

The April 2-4 European Union-Africa Summit, which brought together heads of state from 67 African and European countries in Cairo, was a striking manifestation of the state of mind of the European leadership and its fractured relationship to reality.

Although the news of the famine razing the Horn of Africa was being widely reported in the international media during the summit, the European leaders expressed, once again, their obsession with “globalization,” “free trade,” “environmental protection,” and “democracy.” And, once again, European leaders turned their backs on the most obvious right of the African peoples, the right to life, by demanding their “sterling-pound of flesh.”

Most blunt was the British representative, Foreign Secretary Robin Cook, in collaboration with the BBC and other Anglo-American mass media, which put the crisis over the Zimbabwe elections and land seizures above anything else (see article in this issue).

This attitude set the stage for a clash between two kinds of thinking in Cairo, where the African leaders were determined to put the issues of economic justice, debt relief, and cooperation between the two continents at the top of the agenda.

‘Radical solution’ for the debt burden

In his opening address, the summit’s host, Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, expressed what the African states expected from Europe. “At present, we look forward to a new form of close partnership among our countries, based on common interests and mutual benefits in order to attain the sublime goal of realizing prosperity and welfare for the nations of both continents,” he said. “It is still imperative to work together for boosting this improvement in the political and economic climate through a steady increase in the flow of investment resources; a situation that has not yet materialized properly in many African regions. Conversely, governmental and private financial flows into the continent over the past two decades have shown a tangible drop, while world prices

of raw materials are going down and the continent’s share of the world trade is shrinking. Under these unfavorable external conditions, the African debt crisis has aggravated into unprecedented dimensions while existing mechanisms proved to be either extremely slack or short of easing its burdens.” Expressing the African nations’ hope for a real solution for the debt problem, Mubarak continued, “Here, we would like to emphasize our conviction of the need to find a radical solution to this problem enabling the African continent to utilize these resources in enhancing development efforts and modernizing its infrastructure. . . . We do look forward, not to secure more aid but rather to develop our mutual partnership and cooperation programs.”

Anything short of cancelling African foreign debt and replacing it by real investments in infrastructure and other major projects is simply not serious. Most of the \$350 billion in foreign debt—up from \$110 billion in the early 1980s—which Africa owes mainly to the former colonial powers in Europe, is unpayable. Some of the European leaders’ suggestions of “easing” the debt of the “poorest countries” were accurately scorned by Algerian President Abdul-Aziz Bouteflika, as “a drop of water in the vast desert.”

Bouteflika, the current chairman of the Organization of African Unity (OAU), was more specific on what should be done on the debt issue, both in his speech to the opening session and in the press conference after the final session. Bouteflika said that “not only the poorest states should get debt relief,” but also the countries that are not considered to be as poor. He suggested that all African countries should be allowed to develop their economies, and only then should they have to discuss repayment of the foreign debt. “Given the dramas of hunger, poverty, disease, and low prices for [their] raw materials, Africa cannot be left to the mercy of market forces,” he said.

Any discussion of stopping the payment of debt is taboo among the Western world’s political establishment. The greatest fear of powers running the International Monetary Fund (IMF) system, is that more countries in the developing sector will demand an end to this policy. Hence, the British campaign against Zimbabwe’s President Robert Mugabe, which has two significant aspects: the colonial legacy in the African continent, and outflow of financial resources from Africa into Europe.

The land issue

The issue which the British government and mass media used to launch their assault on President Mugabe centers on his attempt at land reform (70% of the agricultural land is controlled by whites in Zimbabwe, a holdover from the country’s colonial days as Rhodesia). Mugabe’s party, the ZANU-PF, called for reclaiming the land that was underutilized, to redistribute it among Zimbabweans, in the period before the elections. Mugabe said that white farmers should



The European Union-Africa conference in Cairo, April 3. The European representatives recited the usual tired litany about globalization and free trade, while the Africans said, "What about reality?"

be compensated, but that the British government, as the colonial power that seized the land and turned it over to them, is the party that has to pay.

The 4,500 whites who constitute only 0.6% of the country's population, control 70% of the best farming land, while the 1 million blacks control the rest, comprised mostly of arid areas. Moreover, the white-controlled land is used to cultivate tobacco for export, and the revenues are either paid for debt service or otherwise not invested in the development of the country. Unemployment among the black population is more than 50%. To add insult to injury, the British government has been soliciting support from Europe and the United States to stop IMF loans to Zimbabwe, in order to punish Mugabe for supporting the Democratic Republic of the Congo, which is defending itself from the joint invasion forces of Uganda, Rwanda, and Burundi.

The British, who created this horrible reality, are braying that Mugabe is being "undemocratic" and making the elections scheduled for May "unfair." They have latched onto the "threat" to the white farmers to rouse anti-Mugabe sentiments in Europe and the United States.

The attempt by the British to impose this issue on the Cairo summit backfired, because it helped galvanize other African states to rally behind Zimbabwe. Libyan leader Col. Muammar Qaddafi, for example, stated that "Africa does not need lessons in democracy. What Africans need is food and medicine." The Libyan state-controlled press attacked the London government, and demanded that Britain compensate Libya for the damage it caused during World War II.

Mandela shows solidarity for Mugabe

Former South African President Nelson Mandela took the lead as spokesman for African leaders' unity in the face of the British geopolitical destructiveness. In an interview with the April 5 issue of the British daily *Guardian*, Mandela blasted London for trying to become "the policeman of the world" together with the United States, and, referring to their bombing of Iraq and Yugoslavia, for "encouraging international chaos." Mandela voiced support for his neighbor Mugabe, saying: "The South African press unfortunately are so hostile to Mugabe that they are prepared to say things which we know are not true about him. . . . The fact that he has lost the referendum may be a blessing in disguise for him. Because Mugabe is a strategic thinker, he's a very capable man. If I have to express an opinion, he is likely to retain power."

Before leaving for Cairo, Mugabe put his finger on the real relationship between Africa and the West. Speaking to an election rally on March 31, in response to British threats of economic sanctions, he said, "Every month, we remit \$10 million to Britain. Our economy is servicing the British economy. Our only grievance now is over land, but if they raise this issue, we can sanction them better than they can sanction us."

Presently, the African nations seem to be united in their call for justice. It remains to be seen whether that solidarity will materialize in concrete actions, and also, whether Europe and the United States will wake up to the reality of human suffering and economic disintegration.