

African Leaders Reject EU Trade Deal

At the Lisbon summit, the European Union put up a smokescreen of controversy to push through its free trade agenda, but failed.

The European Union tried to strong-arm African nations to accept new trade rules (Economic Partner Agreements—EPAs) by the end of the year, at the long-delayed EU-Africa Summit in Lisbon, Portugal, Dec. 8-9, or face punitive tariffs on exports of their products to the EU. The EU wanted African nations to grant tariff reductions for European goods, which Africans fear will make their own companies vulnerable. The EPAs that the EU wanted six regional groups of African nations to sign, were to be consistent with the globalization paradigm, which would leave African countries unable to defend their ability to build infrastructure and industry, and unable to raise the technological skills of their people.

Although the end-of-the-year deadline had been dictated by the free-trade World Trade Organization (WTO), and negotiations between the EU and Africa have been going on for five years, panic about Europe's ability to prop up its bankrupt banks, as the monetary system collapses, has made the EU desperate to implement the new EPAs, to open up African nations to more efficient looting. Another benefit that would result from the new EPAs, involves the Western fear—as noted by many of the African participants—of the aggressive policy of investment and contracts for development projects in Africa by China: The EPAs would destroy the African nations' ability to defend themselves, leaving no sovereign nations to benefit from the Chinese investment. Hence the Western establishments would be able to maintain their control over Af-

rican resources. The EU is still Africa's biggest trading partner, but China's trade with the continent is gaining rapidly.

At the summit, the EU attempted to push this policy change through behind an elaborate smokescreen of controversy over the issue of the attendance at the summit of Zimbabwe President Robert Mugabe. British Prime Minister Gordon Brown had dramatically announced on Nov. 27 that he would boycott the summit because Portugal was going to allow Mugabe—despite an EU travel ban—to attend. At the summit, South African President Thabo Mbeki asked that African countries be allowed to solve their internal problems themselves.

The attack on Mugabe, which in Brown's absence was taken up by Germany, Denmark, Sweden, and the Netherlands, was also a message to Africa that any nation deemed uncooperative with the EU policy could be turned into a pariah nation over some real or manufactured situation. The Mugabe issue is bogus, because Thabo Mbeki has already organized a solution to the situation in Zimbabwe, which has been agreed to by all parties in the dispute, and supported by all southern African nations. Mugabe himself pointed out that the summit was supposed to be about the EU, Africa, and development, and not about himself.

The acrimonious final stages of the summit overshadowed the cooked-up crisis over Mugabe. Despite the implied threat of being given the Mugabe treatment, and the strongarm tactics of

the EU, African nations rejected the EU proposals, and the EU had to settle for interim agreements on trade.

Africans saw the summit as designed to help Europeans perpetuate their traditional influence in Africa. Ghanaian President John Kufour, who is also African Union chairman, said, "It is time to shake off the colonial past." President Mbeki and Senegal President Abdoulaye Wade refused to accept the EPAs proposed by the EU, and asked that different trade agreements be negotiated. "We are not talking any more about EPAs, we've rejected them . . . we're going to meet to see what we can put in place of the EPAs," said Wade on the second day of the summit, according to the *Swazi Observer* on Dec. 14. Wade also said the EPAs would ruin African industry.

"Speeding up these negotiations will bring no benefits," said Alpha Oumar Konaré, chairman of the African Union Commission, and former president of Mali, speaking to the summit on Dec. 8. He said "a hasty deal might come at a tremendous cost to the rural African populations and to African industry. We need to take the necessary time to conclude fair agreements." He emphasized that "Africa doesn't want charity or paternalism. We don't want anyone doing things for us."

EU Trade Commissioner Peter Mandelson, a close associate of former British Prime Minister Tony Blair, has been using, as a club against Africa, the 2000 WTO ruling that the system of preferential trade deals between Europe and former colonies in Africa, the Caribbean, and the Pacific (ACP) was illegal, and which set the Dec. 31, 2007 deadline. As for the African rejection of his policies at the summit, Mandelson attempted to be disdainful: "You have Mbeki and Wade sounding off." But Mandelson didn't get what he wanted.