

African nations form economic community

by Dana S. Scanlon

African heads of state attending the 27th summit meeting of the Organization of African Unity (OAU) in Abuja, Nigeria signed a treaty at the beginning of June, creating the African Economic Community. The community, made up of the 51 nations of Africa, will be headquartered in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. Established to promote the social, economic, and cultural development and integration of the African continent, the African Economic Community carries within it the seed of hope for hundreds of millions struggling for survival and a future.

Only an integrated, continent-wide approach to the development of energy, transportation, water, and other basic infrastructure will enable African nations to lift themselves out of deprivation and starvation. An aggressive pursuit of this kind of economic development is sure to bring African leaders into a head-on confrontation with the International Monetary Fund (IMF), which, above all, is concerned with population reduction and debt payment.

In addition to the civil war in Liberia and the dismantling of apartheid in South Africa, the issues of Africa's economic plight and its foreign debt burden were high on the agenda of the OAU summit. Africa's foreign debt is estimated at \$270 billion and nearly 50% of its exports annually go to service the debt. Debt service in 1990 alone was estimated at over \$35 billion. In some countries, such as Somalia, Mozambique, and Madagascar, the 1990 debt service obligations ran more than 100% of export earnings. The IMF runs economic and financial "readjustment" programs in many countries, leaving them even more unable to meet the needs of their people than they were before.

The colonialist legacy

The President of Nigeria, Gen. Ibrahim Babangida, has emerged as a leading figure in the continent's fight for debt relief. In addition to hosting the 27th OAU summit in the new federal capital of Abuja, he has also taken over the chairmanship of the OAU for the next year. Speaking to the assembled heads of state on June 3, he vowed to put a "complete suspension of the debt service for a very long period" on the agenda. President Babangida also stressed the "legacy of the past" in increasing Africa's difficulties in developing economically since independence.

"There was a triple tragedy of slavery, colonialism, and neocolonialism which has now spanned nearly 600 years," he pointed out. Historians estimate that more than 12 million men and women were forcibly removed from sub-Saharan Africa and forced into slavery during a 200-year period starting in the 1500s. Throughout the colonial period, local food crops and other such activities were suppressed in favor of exportable materials such as cotton.

President Babangida has launched a campaign to demand that reparations be paid to Africa for the hundreds of years of slavery and other economic subjugation brought on Africa by the imperial and colonial powers. This tactic seems designed to coalesce African leaders and public opinion around a campaign to write off Africa's debt. To much applause, he told the assembled heads of state: "The first step is for us here and now to adopt a continental position on the principle of international reparations for Africa. . . . Before we take our argument to the world stage, we need to carefully collect and record the evidence so that even the most unsympathetic judge or jury will have no choice but to rule in favor of Africa."

President Joaquim Chissano of Mozambique spoke at the conference of the urgent need for the countries of the South "to consider themselves owners of their resources," and for a common policy on such issues as foreign debt, price stability for African goods, investment for development, and food security. He warned that some 28 million Africans are in danger of dying, and that "the dangers of Africa being effectively cast out are real." African economic activity, he said, "ought to give priority to national and collective self-reliance through the full utilization of human and material resources. Africa must be a model of South-South cooperation and solidarity." He also stressed the importance of science and technology, and Africa's need to develop its own centers for research and science.

Debtors and predators

The urgency of forming an Africa-wide coalition for debt cancellation is being voiced by more and more leaders. Former Tanzanian President Julius Nyerere put it succinctly when he spoke to the press in Amsterdam in May, on the occasion of the 20th World Conference of the Society for International Development. The debtor nations, he said, must deal as a group with the "predator" nations, and must not go it alone. He cited the examples of Brazil and Mexico, which failed in past years when they attempted individually to reschedule their debts on favorable terms. "The countries of the South," said Nyerere, "have to sit down and talk to the elephants together."

With the international banking system in shambles, a united Africa would be in a position of strength to propose that economic development and the sanctity of each and every human life in sub-Saharan Africa be the priority, and not usurious debt repayment.