



Statements and Speeches

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THE CRITICAL ECONOMIC SITUATION IN AFRICA

Statement by Stephen Lewis, Ambassador and Permanent Representative of Canada to the United Nations, to Plenary, United Nations General Assembly, New York, November 6, 1984.

...Late last Thursday evening, I happened to be at home with my family in Toronto, Canada, watching the national television news. In a sequence which will be familiar to everyone in this hall, there was an extended report on the tragedy in Ethiopia.

Most of us, over time, have become steeled to the now commonplace images of violence, oppression, and misery. But I cannot remember, in my entire adult life, scenes of such unendurable human desolation. It was heart-breaking. There is no doubt in my mind that Canadians sat and wept, as we did, and would wish to respond with compassion, generosity, fervour. I witnessed in person, in another part of Africa many years ago, the reality of famine, *kwashiorkor*, and outright starvation, but never in such numbers have I seen the emaciated remnants of a once-vibrant humanity.

I sat — as everyone in this Assembly must surely have sat at some point or another over the past several weeks — and asked myself how it was possible that things should come to such a pass in a world which regards itself as fundamentally civilized. No poet, no writer, no artist, could adequately capture the horror.

I shall not belabour it further. The facts are known. You need no lectures from Canada. But I note, as other speakers have noted before me, that Ethiopia forms the backdrop to this debate — as do another 125 million people on the African continent who today face drought, food shortages, hunger, malnutrition and worse.

Canada has strong and visceral ties with most African nations — ties which go right back to the accession of independence. We share with a great many African countries a common language, heritage and political tradition rooted either in the Commonwealth or La Francophonie.

Canadians rejoiced throughout the period of decolonization and the emergence of dynamic African nation states. Indeed, if I may be permitted one additional personal observation, I myself, in my post-university days, spent a year-and-a-half teaching and travelling in Ghana, Nigeria, Uganda and Kenya either shortly before or shortly after independence — and then returned, on two occasions, a decade later. Africa leaves an indelible mark on the mind and spirit. The vitality, the exuberance, the determination, the potential live with one for a lifetime. Nothing I have ever done or experienced has so shaped my own sense of developing societies...their immense prospects, and their sometimes unimaginable adversities.

Canadians share that sense of solidarity. We always have; we always will. It is demonstrated by the
