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Statement by the Honourable
Monique Vézina, Minister for
External Relations, to the
Special Session of the
United Nations General
Assembly on the critical
economic situation in Africa

NEW YORK

May 27, 1986.

Mr. Chairman,
Ministers,
Ambassadors,
Ladies and Gentlemen:

My first remarks are addressed to Mr. Perez de Cuellar, the Secretary-General of the United Nations, and to members of the Preparatory Committee, to whom I extend my sincere thanks for having organized this Special Session of the General Assembly.

We all know why we are gathered here today. The economic crisis in Africa concerns us all. In March 1985 we met in Geneva to respond to a call from Africa which had been stricken by a disastrous famine. Today this food crisis, while not entirely behind us, is being resolved. This is encouraging.

As it meets here today, at the request of the OAU, the international community is responding also to the deep concerns of our peoples. Speaking for Canadians, emergency assistance for those who are dying of starvation is not enough. The people of Canada want us to move beyond the crisis to address its causes. This is what they expect of me; and this is what I intend to do in the next few days, months, and years.

I wish to begin by reporting to you how Canadians have responded to the African crisis of the past two years. I shall then address the economic policy proposals which African Governments themselves have put forward to renew economic growth and development in the region. I shall then indicate how we foresee our contribution to the continent's development.

Mr. Chairman, we Canadians have been deeply touched by the African crisis. The people of Canada mobilized in an unprecedented way, in an attempt to come to the assistance of those stricken by that disaster. The response took many forms. First, there was the remarkable job done by the news media, who, with perseverance, compassion and respect, generated public awareness of the problem. There were also tens of thousands of offers of assistance from individuals, groups, institutions,

provincial and municipal governments that felt compelled to help; trade unions, cooperatives, local groups, schools and universities spontaneously organized collections of funds and offered their assistance. More than \$60 million was collected from the general public. Our volunteer organizations involved in international cooperation spontaneously formed an Africa Emergency Assistance committee. So widespread was this grass-roots reaction that our government appointed a special coordinator to harmonize the activities of all the groups and organizations wishing to assist Africa.

Later I shall refer to the lessons that we drew from this experience.

Mr. Chairman, I have briefly outlined the Canadian response to the African crisis. I would be remiss if I failed to mention how the Africans themselves reacted to the situation. The Governments and peoples of Africa were far from inactive. Quite the contrary. The emergency assistance was administered and financed in the first instance by none other than the Africans themselves. The whole of Africa, as soon as the rains resumed, increased its grain production to 55 million tonnes, a 34% growth over 1984. Countries like Ivory Coast, Togo and Zimbabwe shared their food surpluses with fellow Africans in other countries. And need I say anything about the extraordinary example of solidarity that the African countries have always shown the international community in receiving and assisting refugees?

Finally, Mr. Chairman, Canada attaches considerable importance to the fact that African Governments themselves have taken the lead in turning toward lasting solutions. They have provided their own analysis of the fundamental problems. Our own analysis leads us to identify many, if not most of the same principle elements relating to the causes of the crisis.

The OAU has proposed the idea of joint responsibility in which assistance would be tied to tangible evidence of a determined desire to bring about necessary adjustment. Canada welcomes this approach and commits itself to support African countries in their efforts. The level of resources that we shall commit to African development will continue to be substantial, and will be provided with increased flexibility. In that regard, since April 1, following a decision made by the Prime Minister of Canada, our official development assistance program is now implemented entirely through grants.

The OAU recognizes that priority must be given to agricultural development; that policies must be adopted which will create the environment needed for development; that agricultural research must be encouraged; and that exceptional measures must be taken to assist women and population groups primarily responsible for agricultural development. For our part, we will make these the top priorities in our cooperative activities in Africa.

The OAU has underscored the importance of continuing the struggle against drought and desertification, improving public investment policies and encouraging the private sector: these are factors that we too consider essential to recovery.

By strengthening management institutions, by reforming monetary and financial policies, by introducing demographic policies, and by recognizing characteristics peculiar to each region, the OAU feels that essential elements of a solution can be found. How can we help but share this point of view?

We are heartened to hear the OAU address the need for us jointly to improve the effectiveness of our development cooperation, especially with respect to program support, evaluation of technical assistance, and aid coordination.

African countries seek an international economic environment supportive of growth, the elimination of protectionism, and pursuit of trade and agricultural policies favourable to developing countries. Canada supports these objectives. We will continue to support the strengthening of growth oriented policies through the IMF and the World Bank. We are committed to dealing with trade problems in a new negotiation within GATT. We are ready to

explore how we can address cooperatively problems facing commodity producers within UNCTAD (United Nations Conference on Trade and Development), and through World Bank programs for structural adjustment.

A further elaboration of the OAU proposals involves debt relief, support for reforms in Africa, financial support for priority programs, and follow-up mechanisms at both national and international levels. Canada also sees these as being important components of the overall solution.

But problems are not solved merely by understanding their nature. There must be action, and it must be concerted. Concrete measures must be taken.

I spoke about the grave concern over Africa felt by Canadians. Because of this, my government was confident that it had the full support of our people when it launched the Africa 2000 initiative on May 6.

This is a long-term commitment that Canada believes it must make toward development. \$150 million of the Canadian International Development Agency's current funds have been made available exclusively for this operation over the next five years. Combined with the already impressive amounts earmarked for our aid and cooperation program in Africa, it will bring to more than \$900 million for 1986-1987 alone the money, goods and services transferred from Canada to Africa.

In the Canadian House of Commons I announced that this was only the first phase of our action plan. Today I am pleased to outline two additional measures that Canada plans to take immediately.

I have already spoken of the debt that is hindering the development and growth of the sub-Saharan countries and bringing tragic consequences to their people.

A significant part of this debt arises from outstanding loans originally offered under official development assistance. Debt of this nature owed to Canada totals \$700 million and involves a burden of \$250 million in repayments over the next 15 years for the countries concerned. Today I am announcing that Canada is offering to sub-Saharan countries a moratorium on repayment of these loans for an initial period of five years. We are prepared

to extend this measure in five-year segments until the year 2000. In this way, we wish to help in providing all the countries of sub-Saharan Africa that face serious external payments difficulties, and that have demonstrated a commitment to undertake necessary economic adjustment, the room to manoeuvre that they need to put their economies back on a solid foundation.

On a country-by-country basis, we are prepared to immediately begin discussing the application of this measure within the framework of World Bank Consultative Groups or in other appropriate forums.

This measure is a modest one, but it is practical and concrete. It is meant to reinforce the support that the international community will provide to the countries which are making efforts to adjust. We hope that other countries will adopt similar measures.

The second measure that I wish to announce relates to the lessons that we have drawn from the food crisis in Africa. Over the past two years it has been evident to us that Africa's greatest strength lies in the determination, courage, and experience of its people. It is the Africans themselves who are the masters and the architects of their future.

Our involvement in the emergency operations of the past two years has shown us that the villages, local communities, volunteer agencies and non-governmental organizations can play a strategic part in mobilizing Africa's human energies and involving them in the continent's own development. In Canada's Africa 2000 program, I announced our objective of introducing 2000 small cooperation projects in Africa from now to the end of 1987. Our very first partners in this undertaking will be Canada's voluntary organizations, which explains why their representatives are here as official members of our delegation.

In the same line of thinking, Canada is proposing at this session to create a new mechanism within the multilateral aid system. Its role would be to make available to local communities, village councils and volunteer organizations in Africa, funds and technical expertise to help them to carry out projects of their own choosing to meet their needs in the fields of desertification, conservation of ground cover, and food production. We are convinced that this new approach deserves our best efforts.

We have therefore asked the United Nations Development Program to help us to develop the details of such a facility for Africa. My government is pleased with the response we have received from Mr. William Draper, the UNDP's new Administrator. He has assured us of his support to set up a working group to elaborate this concept. We are grateful for his support.

Canada is prepared to contribute \$20 million over five years to such a new mechanism once it has been created. We hope that other governments will want to take part, either by contributing financially or by other means. A number of developing countries have remarkable experience in food production and social forestry. I trust they will want to share their expertise and their resources with those in need in Africa.

We see this initiative as an act of faith in Africa's greatest wealth: its population, its small producers, and its men and women farmers.

There is not a crisis that does not hold promise. We will bear witness to this in this Assembly through our innovative and common action. This is my firm belief, and that of all of Canada. This is why as Minister for External Relations and on behalf of my government, I promise to do my utmost, looking ahead to what Africa can be in the year 2000, the Africa in which you and I believe.

Thank you.