



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

close relationships; by the development efforts over the years; by our mutual and uncompromising repugnance for *apartheid*; and by our determination, with others, that Namibia shall one day be free.

But most of all, that solidarity inevitably comes to the fore when debating a subject like this: the economic crisis in Africa. Last week, on the very matter of this speech, I journeyed to Ottawa to meet with Prime Minister Mulroney. He explicitly asked me to convey to this Assembly the sense of importance which Canada attaches to these deliberations.

On November 1, just five days ago, our Secretary of State for External Affairs appointed a prominent and much-respected Canadian as emergency co-ordinator for the African food crisis, to ensure that all of the efforts we undertake are effective in their intended reduction of human suffering. As is well known, transportation and logistical difficulties are of particular concern. It will be part of the co-ordinator's job to overcome the bottlenecks, and to see to it that the assistance is delivered as quickly as possible.

Just yesterday — in fact, just last night — the co-ordinator and the Secretary of State returned to Canada from a trip to Addis Ababa to assess, at ground level, what best might be done. It was an initiative deliberately designed further to galvanize Canadian public opinion.

In the case of Ethiopia, Canada has already contributed between one quarter and one third of all food aid over the past four years, amounting to some 275 000 tonnes. In light of the present crisis, we have dramatically increased our food aid to Ethiopia by more than 50 per cent to a level of \$26 million Canadian for 1984-85. As contributions from individual Canadians and Canadian organizations pour in, we will obviously do more.

But as speaker after speaker in this debate has indicated the response to the emergency is merely the beginning. What must come now is an Herculean effort, on the part of all member nations, to address those conditions which give rise to the crisis.

At the heart of the response lie the efforts of the African nations themselves. They have been and are, indomitable in pressing the issues to the world stage. In particular, the Economic Commission for Africa Conference of Ministers in Addis Ababa last June analyzed the crisis in vivid detail and provided a series of short, medium and long-term prescriptions. The ministers deserve our every support.

Indeed, when you think of it there is a certain *déjà vu* about this very debate. It is right and necessary that there be a culmination to the process which began some time ago, but let us see it as a culmination, given the litany of studies, reports, documents and conferences which have animated United Nations activity on Africa throughout all of the intervening months.

The Secretary-General alone has released a number of searching and thoughtful papers in 1984. Indeed, it is difficult to underscore adequately the remarkable quality of the Secretary-General's initiatives on Africa. His office has provided focus, momentum, and objectives.

The UN Economic and Social Council last July, as everyone knows, engaged in a notable discussion on the problems of the continent.

So too, the World Bank's Special Program for Sub-Saharan African, and finally, during the course of this debate, there is the emergence of the "Draft Declaration on the Critical Economic Situation in Africa".

What we are saying is that we have subjected the crisis in Africa to a continuing and remorseless dissection, and it is now time to act upon the generally shared conclusions. Having listened carefully to my predecessors in this debate, it becomes clear that every participant country, with varying shades of emphasis, seems committed to the proposition that the crisis of Africa is an international *cause célèbre* which the collective political will of this United Nations must resolve. And above all, on this kind of fundamental issue, we must seek agreement without any of the extraneous immoderation which turns useful debate into spasms of irrationality.

That is the position of Canada. But it of course goes further, into the matters of substance as well:

It is now widely recognized that structural impediments to growth, especially in agriculture, have been the source of much of the decline in output. The Food and Agriculture Organization estimates that for agriculture alone, *per capita* output fell in Sub-Saharan Africa by an average of 1 per cent a year during the 1970s and the decline has been even more dramatic in the 1980s. Pricing, marketing, investment and income policies have failed to provide adequate incentives to local producers. Governments often didn't make food production a priority in terms of public investment. Rapid growth in population — between 3.2 and 4 per cent *per annum* — has also been an additional barrier to self-sufficiency in food, as has the expanding desertification and loss of agricultural land. These tendencies, coupled with an international recession characterized by falling commodity prices, high interest rates, rising energy costs and inflation have crippled production and economic growth.

Just as the immediate crisis cannot be ignored, the deteriorating economic situation in Africa over the past decade can neither be dismissed nor hidden. African nations and the international community must both acknowledge that our past initiatives have failed in whole or in part. For African countries it means a recognition that some of their domestic policies have been ineffective or inappropriate — a recognition, incidentally, which is implicitly contained in the Draft Declaration. For the international community it means that many of our investments have been misdirected or ill-conceived. We have probably placed too much emphasis on the financing of new infrastructure, and ignored the problems of maintaining it. More of the same is pointless for us all.

Canada believes therefore that remedies must be simultaneously applied to the short-term crisis and long-term economic malaise. Our immediate concern, naturally enough, has been relief to the estimated 150 million victims of the drought in the 24 most seriously affected countries, and to the four million refugees from other natural or man-made disasters. In 1983-84, Canada provided over \$100 million in various forms of assistance to meet emergency food shortages in Africa.

Our commitment will not diminish. It has intensified. In 1984-85 African countries will receive over

\$90 million in bilateral food aid alone, almost doubling last year's allocation. It represents 45 per cent of all such Canadian aid. Another \$14 million will be allocated for international relief organizations. Assistance to Africa through the World Food Program, to which Canada is the second largest donor, will be maintained at its current high levels.

Furthermore, Canada has participated actively in the work of the Second Conference on Assistance for Refugees in Africa to establish guidelines for the development of programs for refugees — guidelines which respect their international legal rights. Canada has indicated an interest in projects with a value of more than \$15 million, destined for at least six countries.

Africa will remain a priority for Canadian development co-operation as it has in the past. More than 40 per cent of Canada's bilateral assistance, representing over \$225 million in 1983-84, is devoted to African countries. In response to the critical balance-of-payments situation of many of Canada's development partners on the African continent, we have made a shift towards program support as opposed to project support, allowing for more rapid and flexible financial transfers. To maintain existing infrastructures, support is increasingly provided for recurrent costs and maintenance costs. Our financing in Sub-Saharan Africa is now primarily in the form of grants. All of these policies will be sustained and improved wherever possible.

We all recognize that agriculture is the primary key to Africa's long-term development. Food and agriculture will continue to be the most important sectoral priority for Canadian official development assistance during the 1980s. We will continue to direct an increasing volume of resources towards the agricultural sector. In 1983-84, 38 per cent of the Canadian International Development Agency's bilateral disbursements in Africa went toward the promotion of food security, agricultural production and related infrastructure. However, we recognize that Canada's contribution can only support, rather than substitute for, efforts on the part of recipient governments to deal with the underlying problems facing food production. It is they who will find the means and devise the strategies to tap Africa's undoubted agricultural potential. As the changes in policies are made, Canada stands committed to further assistance.

Improved co-ordination is also essential for domestic and international efforts in the short and long term. The African countries must play a key role in ensuring that all available resources are utilized effectively. Such a policy requires close co-operation with the donors, with the World Bank and the United Nations Development Program to improve co-ordinating mechanisms. There is an indispensable need for an integrated framework. What does that mean? It means that there must be a framework at the country level to guide all donors and that country itself in developing programs of support for structural adjustment. We have made recent progress in this area, and we salute the willingness of many African countries to respond to this challenge.

Moreover, resources are not merely physical and financial, they are human. It is clear to everyone that the human resources' potential within Africa itself must be tapped if long-term development in all of these areas is to succeed. The provision of outside experts on a short-term basis is a mere stop-gap. In order to maintain the momentum which, we hope, will start with this debate, all parties

involved must pledge themselves to the provision of the necessary education and training for African personnel. In short, human resource development must play a central role in any future African development. That principle is one of the pillars of Canada's aid program.

All of that leads us irresistibly to the need for what economists call "increased financial flows". Or to put it in the language of the layman: more money.

In that regard, it is distressing to note the projected decline in net capital flows identified by the World Bank in its Joint Plan of Action. As the new Canadian Minister of Finance said a mere six weeks ago, "We would urge Bank management to continue active consultations with donor governments with a view to increasing bilateral and multilateral flows to Sub-Saharan Africa."

Canada recognizes that greater funding from the developed international community is necessary, and Canada will play its full part in the provision of greater funding for Africa. Indeed, we will also continue to work for adequate funding of the International Development Association, the International Fund for Agricultural Development, the United Nations Development Program and other organizations that have a key role in channeling concessional monies towards Africa.

In concluding, I would like to return to the Draft Declaration since it will undoubtedly serve as the lasting expression of this important debate.

Declarations neither feed the hungry nor alleviate human suffering. But they can act as a remarkable catalyst to collective action.

This Draft Declaration, potentially, is a singular document. It is lucid and sensible. It ties all of the strands together.

It speaks, eloquently, to the immediate human tragedy; it recites, convincingly, the emergency around food, water and the ugly encroachment of the desert; it identifies the decline in export earnings, the appalling levels of indebtedness, and the stagnation of resources; it asserts the responsibilities of African governments themselves to fashion development policies in response to the crisis; it confers importance on national food strategies and integrated rural development plans; it acknowledges the primacy of physical and social infrastructure; it stamps with approval the urgent need for co-ordination; and it argues, with irrefutable cogency, the case for a substantial increase in bilateral and multilateral funding.

With all of that, Canada can agree. On those few points where we may differ, the Draft Declaration offers a promising basis for mutual accord.

One of the primary reasons for this debate is to mobilize international opinion in our respective countries and abroad. A final Declaration, adopted by consensus, would go a long way to that end.

When we are finished with the words, there remains the vulnerability of the human condition. Let's get on with the tasks that lie ahead.

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