

SOUTHERN AFRICA: Getting crumbs from the UNCED table

Rio de Janeiro, June 24, 1992 (AIA/Carole Collins and Colin Darch) — One hundred seventeen world leaders, 30 of them African, ate dove eggs wrapped in salami and roast veal a la Diplomate at the Earth Summit in Rio. At the end of the summit, southern Africa — suffering its worst drought in more than 100 years — have come home with little more than crumbs.

Because Northern governments, corporate and media agendas dominated the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), southern African governments found little to cheer about in its modest achievements.

Grassroots activists from the region, concerned like others in Africa and the "third world" about democracy and transparency in the international arena, found little encouragement in the official UN summit process.

Southern African officials were clearly treated at the limited resources rich countries were willing to commit to poorer countries' efforts to preserve the environment.

"UNCED has achieved a lot. It was historic in its importance but, I regret to say, it has also failed in some respects," Botswana President Ketumile Masire said in his speech on behalf of African countries at the summit's closing plenary.

"It's a step. It's not a solution, but it is a positive step," commented John William Kachamila, Mozambique's mineral resources minister. "But what the developing countries need is something a lot bigger," he added.

Tanzania's President Ali Hassan Mwinyi told world leaders the global environmental crisis consists of two kinds of emergencies: "loud" ones such as global warming, and "silent" ones which affect the daily lives of billions of the world's poor.

His remarks underlined the wide gulf between the priorities of the rich, industrialised North and the urgent needs of the South.

Southern African officials and activists alike were angered by richer countries' dismissal of issues such as fuelwood exhaustion, toxic waste disposal, or the dumping of dangerous pharmaceutical products, as "local" concerns less important than the "global" issues — such as climate change and ozone depletion — preoccupying the North.

Some were clearly frustrated by US intransigence on issues of concern to both Africa and the world.

"It's not possible to believe President George Bush's election campaign considerations are more important than the contents of the biodiversity treaty," Zimbabwe's President Mugabe said at a press conference in Ecuador while en route to the earth summit.

Despite appeals made by several presidents of SADCC member states, the conference ignored one of southern Africa's most pressing problems: reconstruction of rural and urban environments devastated by white South Africa's wars of destabilisation against its neighbours.

In fact, the US pressed consistently to exclude mention of war as a source of environmental degradation. Hence there was no discussion of possible funding for

converting the region's "surplus armies," after decades of cold war-fueled conflict, into "green battalions" which could help repair the massive war damage in countries like Angola and Mozambique.

Usually at odds in domestic arenas, southern Africa's heads of state such as Tanzania's Mwinyi found common ground with the region's activists in stressing the primary importance of poverty as the most critical factor fueling environmental degradation.

"The 'loud' emergencies have yet to affect many people," Mwinyi told summit leaders. "But the silent emergencies, the more immediate issues of human survival are already wasting many lives...some 1.5 billion people in developing countries do not have access to health services."

SADCC country delegations arrived in Brazil sharing a continent-wide common position thrashed out last year in a series of UN Economic Commission for Africa and Organisation of African Unity meetings. A central priority was to ensure increasing desertification — a scientifically contentious subject — be recognised as a global problem rather than just an African concern.

African delegates were clearly pleased when the conference agreed to set up an Inter-governmental Negotiating Committee (INC) to negotiate an international convention on drought and desertification control, in a process similar to that which produced the recently approved conventions on climate change and biodiversity.

More than 45 percent of the world's deserts are located in Africa.

"Agreeing to develop a convention on desertification was a high African priority," said Raymond Kwerepe, a rangeland ecologist at Botswana's Ministry of Agriculture. But former Tanzanian president Julius Nyerere, attending UNCED as an informal advisor to Maurice Strong, the meeting's secretary-general, still saw hard work ahead.

"Africans were specifically concerned with desertification, and that is now being taken seriously and accepted. We will have to sit down together and tackle the problem."

But for southern Africa delegations, drought-induced food shortages presented an even more immediate threat. It's estimated that the region will need 5.2 million tonnes of food aid by July, worth an estimated US\$1.6 billion and an additional seven million tonnes by the end of the year. Between them, South Africa and Zimbabwe have lost around 70-80 percent of this year's food crops. At the summit, Canada announced it would commit an additional US\$50 million in emergency relief for drought victims.

Despite their limited numbers and preparation, African activists and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) did make their voices heard, both during the official deliberations — held at Riocentro, a plush high-security conference centre about 45 kilometres from downtown Rio — and at the parallel NGO Global Forum, organised by the world's environmental activists, in a beachfront park near the city centre.

The NGO Forum provided a much-needed exercise in skills transfer for many of the relatively inexperienced African groups. Only 16 African countries had NGO representatives at the parallel Global

Forum. Of 791 NGOs officially accredited to UNCED, only 230 were based in the South. But both at Global Forum — where they were lost among the astonishing 7,946 participating groups from 187 countries — and at UNCED, African NGOs managed to play their most assertive role ever at a world level meeting.

At the Forum, NGOs joined in an open discussion process which produced 33 different NGO "treaties" on a wide range of issues from militarism and racism to debt and trade policy.

African NGOs also issued a hard-hitting "Rio Declaration on Eradication of Poverty in Africa." Reviewing the likely post-UNCED future, it attacks governments for having lost "the will to deal with the principal causes of environmental degradation," which it identifies principally as militarisation, over-consumption, exploitative trade patterns and unfair and coercive financial systems.

The text also calls for a popular cartel to protect Africa's land resources and products, as well as an "eco-cultural" surcharge on the continent's exports. Confronting charges from the rich countries that population is a root cause of poverty rather than the other way around, the African "Rio Declaration" demands that "resources wastefully spent on coercive birth and population control be invested in programmes for improving human welfare and the quality of life for the rural poor, especially women and children."

NGO activists such as Sam Moyo of the Zimbabwe Energy Resources Organisation and Benjamin Makunzi Valerie of Angola's "Programa Humanitario para Crianças Orfas" (Humanitarian Program for Orphans, PHCO), played active roles as support staff or even technical advisors for their countries' official delegations. This reflected a growing realisation that NGOs often have expertise on environmental issues that governments lack. Valerie also represented a new national NGO co-ordinating structure, scarcely a year old, reflecting the dramatic growth of NGOs in southern Africa.

For many of the newer African NGOs, Rio was more of a learning experience than productive of concrete outcomes. PHCO's Valerie said for him one of the main shocks of the meeting had been to learn how poor his organisation's funding proposals had been.

The idea that democracy was a necessary — if not a sufficient — precondition for saving the planet was a strong current, not only at Global Forum, but also at UNCED.

Democracy is needed not only within nations, but also between them, said Niko Bessinger, Namibia's Minister of Wildlife, Conservation and Tourism. He called for "the democratisation of 'our country, the Planet', as Sir Shridath Ramphal has put it...where the weak and the small and the impoverished share fully in the [political] process."

Note: Carole Collins, UN Correspondent for the US-based National Catholic Reporter and Colin Darch, currently on the staff of the Center for Afro-Asian Studies in Rio de Janeiro, both write for numerous publications on Africa.