SOUTHERN AFRICA: Getting crumbs from the UNCED table

Rio de Janeiro, June 24, 1992 (AJA/ 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 Diplomatc at the summit, southern Africa - suffering its African, dove eggs wrapped in hundred seventeen world leadcrs, 30 of United Nations Conference on summit pÌoccss. Environment and Development (TNCED), southern African governments found littlc summit's closing plenary. President Ketumile Masire said in his bas also failed in somc respcc8, "Botswana historic in its imporunce but, I regret to say, it concerned like others in Africa and thc most pressing problcms: r€@ìstruction of summit.

President Mugabc said at a press confer-geÍ," hc addcd. "Agreing to devclop a @nvention on drought and dcscirtification control, in a processes which produced the recently approved conventions on clima- change and biodiversity. More than 45 percent of the world's desert arc lastcd in Africa."

African delegates were clearly pleased when the conference agreed to set up an Inter-governmcntal Negotiating Committee (INC) to negotiate an international conven- tion on drought and desertification control, in a process in which produced the recently approved conventions on cli- mate change and biodiversity. More than 45 percent of the world's desert arc lastcd in Africa.

"Agreeing to develop a convention on desertification was a high African priority," said Raymond Kwerepe, a rangeland ecologi-ast at Botswana's Ministry of Agriculture. But former Tanzanian presi- dent Julius Nyerere, attending UNCED as an informal advisor to Maurice Strong, the meeting's secretary-general, still saw hard work ahead. "African policies 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 esti- mated 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-gov- ernmental 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 new, less experienced 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 of decision-making in a process of globalisation.

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 link between human rights and environment, it attacks governments for having lost “the will to deal with the principal causes of environmental degrada- tion,” which it identifies principally as militarisation, over-consumption, exploitation, 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 “ecological 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” declared: “this racist policy wastesfefully spent on coercive birth and popu- lation control be invested in programmes for improving human welfare and the quality of life for the rural poor, especially women and children.” NGOs activists such as Sam Moyo of the Zimbabwe Energy Resources Organisation and Benjamin Makanuzi Valerie of Angola’s “Programa Humantario para Criancas 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 was the meeting had been to learn bow poor his organisation’s funding proposals had been.

The idea that democracy was a neces- sary — 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 in “equitable” world, 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.