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EU-Africa Where Do We Go From Here?

By Lisa Monaghan in Belfast for CAAGLOP (17/12/2007)

"We are here to ... write a new page in the history of relations between Europe and Africa" declared Portugal's Prime Minister, Jose Socrates in the inaugural speech of the AU/EU summit in Lisbon. It was intended to be two days in which the leaders of Africa and Europe would engage in dialogue which had "no taboos, no sacred cows", in order to establish and fortify Africa and Europe's strategic partnership and post-colonial friendship. In reality it more closely resembled business as usual.

The scale of the summit was impressive. The intentions of the summit were certainly noble. But for all those who attended, and for all those who observed with clear vested interest must be left wondering have we not been here before? And more difficultly, where do we go from here?

Despite a wide range of topics on the table for discussion, two topics continued to dominate, the EPA's and human rights. The issue of Economic Partnership Alliances has been an issue of contention. The African leaders have greeted the proposed free-trade agreement between the AU and EU member states cautiously. Many Africa leaders expressed concerns that opening their markets, even partially and progressively, to cheap European goods could damage their economies. The AU has stated clearly that it will resist pressures to hastily ratify any agreement, and that they are unwilling to

enter into any agreement which will reinforce existing patterns of economic trade

There is real imperative for both sides to come to an agreement. For virtually all African ACP countries, the EU is their main trading partner. The EU, on its part is, concerned at the expansion of Chinese investment in its old stomping ground. Chinese investment comes with the lucrative incentive of no human rights conditionality so the EU is keen to wrap up any agreement post haste.

Irish Prime Minister Bertie Ahern sought to allay the fears of African countries stating "the EU approach must be one of goodwill, one of flexibility, understanding. ...Poor countries cannot be forced into unfair deals.". EU development commissioner Louis Michel added that the EPA's would include long transition periods and "generous" regional funds to cover the financial impact of any agreement.

Only time will tell what form the EPA's will take but the AU countries have taken an emboldened step in resisting pressure for rapid or detrimental agreement. The AU warned the EU should "avoid playing certain Africa regions off against each other," and that "No African country can forge ahead alone of others". This statement of unity, although a warning to the EU, was intended as much for AU members themselves. The African nations are divided over the issue of EPA's and the idea of regional deals, resulting in the very real prospect of an AU split on the issue.

The second issue was that of Human Rights. Sudan and Chad both got a mention at the summit but the attendance of Robert Mugabe invariably raised the largest stir among European leaders. Recently buoyed by the acknowledgement of the EU Commission President, Jose Manuel Barroso of Mugabe's status as a "leader", Mugabe needed not be overly emboldened. German Chancellor, Angela Merkel raised the issue of

what the EU considers to be severe human rights violations, stating that the world could not stand by while human rights were "trampled" underfoot.

Although the Zimbabwean ruler may have been defiant in the face of European criticism, the reality is that Zimbabwe remains a contentious issue. Ms Merkel said. "Zimbabwe concerns us all, in Europe and Africa," she told the summit. She called on European and African leaders to stand by the people of Zimbabwe and work to promote democracy there. In reality it was Europe who was doing all the talking. President Thabo Mbeki, who made Africa's keynote speech at the summit, didn't make any mention Zimbabwe in his speech, despite playing the role as facilitator for a resolution of the Zimbabwean issue.

The Mugabe issue is symptomatic of a wider policy of "Fortress Africa", in which the African alliance is effectively is defiant in the face of any form of criticisms by its new "partner". Merkel stated that "the current situation in Zimbabwe damages the image of the new Africa" and one has to wonder about the long-term affect if the AU continues to fail to acknowledge the EU's concerns. The negative impact of the media train continues to threaten to unravel any constructive work undertaken at the summit.

After the summit, the Zimbabwean government-controlled Herald newspaper published an article in which it quoted Information Minister Sikhanyiso Ndlovu as calling German Chancellor Angela Merkel a "Nazi remnant" and a "racist". The EU ended up bowing to African leaders in extending an invite to Mugabe to attend, many of whom threatened not to come if their peer was excluded, but one it is questionable whether this act of solidarity will lead to the Robert Mugabe effect dominating and unravelling any sense of good-will.

The legacy of colonialism continues to sour the

relations between the AU and EU member states. Libya's leader Moamer Kadhafi, and former international pariah, called again for Friday for compensation for the colonial era. Although there is an element of showmanship in this call, the shadow of colonialism remains a spectre. Colonial blame, from a European perspective, appears to be abused as a get out clause for African leaders who fail to provide what the EU considers to be good governance. Although Morocco's Prime Minister El Fassi Abbas is accurate in stating that "the Africa continent has many problems of development, particularly under-development, which have historical causes, in particular colonialism", ownership of non-structural African problems has to be grasped by African leaders.

With all things said, the summit did pass off and the leaders have committed to maintaining this relationship. A positive sentiment was voiced when Ghana's President John Kufuor, the African Union's current president, commented that "we met at this summit talking plainly and directly as equals" and equality of relationship is the most important foundation stone. Where does the relationship go from here? Hopefully forwards rather than entrenched in the past.

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