

Report from Africa by Mary Lalevée

Debt crisis dominates OAU meeting

Famine in Africa is worsening, despite lying U.N. reports that five countries have returned to "normal."

Africa cannot let its children die of starvation, just to pay back its debts," said Tanzanian President Julius Nyerere on the first day of the annual meeting of the Organization of African Unity in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia on July 18. The annual meeting for the first time concentrated solely on economic matters.

Nyerere pointed out that Africa's debt of approximately \$170 billion was increasing by 20% per annum, and that interest payments alone amount to \$30 billion of the total \$170 billion. He stressed that the economic fight facing Africa, to overcome famine and recession, was "more difficult than the political fight" to free Africa from colonialism.

The African heads of state endorsed a statement, the Addis Ababa Declaration, which has two goals: a five-year crash program to make Africa self-sufficient in food, and dialogue with the West and financial institutions to bring about economic recovery. They called for an international summit on the debt crisis, and called for relief of interest payments. The outgoing acting Secretary General of the OAU, Peter Onu, stressed the need to open a dialogue with Africa's creditors, mostly European, to escape from "this nightmare." The British daily the *Times* commented laconically that such talks with Africa's creditors "are considered unlikely to take place."

The Organization for African Unity also called for a special meeting of

the United Nations on Africa, and called on the industrialized nations not only to concentrate on emergency aid for Africa, but to contribute to the long-term reconstruction of African economies.

The new president of the OAU, Senegalese President Abdou Diouf, urged his colleagues to take the program very seriously, saying that what was at stake was the credibility of African leaders in front of their people, in front of the world and "in front of history." He said that the continent should mobilize all its forces and raw materials to ensure the food supply of Africa's population.

The newly elected General Secretary, the foreign minister of Niger, Ide Oumarou, compared the task of overcoming the crisis in Africa with a "fight for the completion of [political] independence."

Onu had also called for action, saying, "If we don't succeed in implementing what we have freely decided, we will condemn this continent to remain, for an indefinite period, in a state of economic enslavement."

Reports say that monetary reform was discussed at the conference, and that an Egyptian proposal to develop barter trade deals among African nations, saving scarce foreign exchange, was accepted.

The crushing conditionalities demanded by the IMF in exchange for financial aid were not publicly discussed: African leaders have clearly been warned that if they act against

the IMF, all forms of aid will be promptly cut off.

The fact that the situation cannot continue as it is, with 150 million Africans facing famine and starvation this year, was also pointed out by Edouard Saouma, the director of the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), who called for at least a partial cancellation of Africa's debts by its creditors. "Africa loses from one hand what it receives in the other, and therefore falls deeper and deeper into poverty."

The latest report from the FAO on the food crisis in Africa says that the already critical situation has further deteriorated in several of the 21 countries affected by famine.

The most acute food emergency is in Chad, Ethiopia, Mali, Niger, and Sudan. Transport and logistical problems are once again named as the biggest problem, and the FAO calls—very belatedly—for an expansion of the programs to airlift and airdrop food.

The FAO writes that in eight of the affected countries—Burundi, Kenya, Lesotho, Morocco, Rwanda, Tanzania, Zambia, and Zimbabwe—the drought has been broken and "the food supply is back to normal." "Normal" in FAO parlance means "the same production level as five years ago," which is way below the minimum necessary for a normal diet. Witness the fact that average life expectancy in those countries is some 20 years or more below life expectancy in the industrialized countries.

Speaking at the United Nations Economic and Social Council meeting in Geneva on July 23, FAO director Saouma called for a Marshall Plan for Africa, saying that Africa did not wish to live off hand-outs forever, and that international food aid without long-term programs to relaunch cattle rearing and agriculture was as good as useless.