
Conference Report

Iran takes up the fight for the development of Africa

by Muriel Mirak Weissbach

If events in Africa have made the headlines of the world's main press organs, it has been, more often than not, to chronicle the ongoing genocide perpetrated against civilian populations throughout the Great Lakes region, or to deny that it is taking place. Rarely has public opinion been informed of constructive efforts being launched, to benefit the nations of the great African continent.

In this light, a conference which took place in the Iranian capital of Teheran recently, deserves considerable attention. On July 14-15, a seminar was held, which posed the central strategic issue, what future for the African continent. The seminar, sponsored by the Institute for Political and International Studies (IPIS), was the third on the theme which this institute, associated with the Foreign Ministry, has organized over recent years. Political figures joined with clergy, academic researchers, including several from Europe, and members of the diplomatic corps from Africa, to present views on "Iran-Africa: Practical Ways for Development and Cooperation." Papers on a variety of themes, related to economic, political, and cultural questions, were presented by Iranian government officials and guests. Among the government spokesmen, were His Excellency Abdollah Kashani Movahed, Director of International Affairs of the Ministry of Industry; H.E. Hossein Shaikh al-Islam, Deputy Foreign Minister for Arab and African Countries; H.E. Seyyed Mohammed Kazem Khansari, Director General of Arab Middle East and North Africa, Ministry of Foreign Affairs; H.E. Karbasian, Deputy Trade Minister; and others. Among the speakers from Africa, were the ambassadors from South Africa, Senegal, and Sierra Leone; diplomats from Libya, Egypt, Nigeria, and Niger, were also present.

Even if the conference had been convoked, merely to provide basic information on the subject, it would have been a laudable effort. Although Iran's activities on the Eurasian continent, linked to the expansion of railway networks, have been the subject of careful, usually critical scrutiny and press commentary, the country's foreign policy thrust in Africa has been either ignored, or condemned as an attempt to "Islamize" the continent. Thus, it was extremely important to set the record straight.

The contours of Iran's Africa policy were presented by the outgoing Iranian President, Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani. Speaking to a closed session of speakers and diplomatic guests of the seminar, President Rafsanjani, who conducted a successful Africa tour last year, developed the concept that countries of the developing sector, in particular in Africa, have much to benefit from in the experience of the Islamic Republic of Iran. The I.R.I. could be a model, he said, in that it, like many African countries, had resources which were being plundered by international forces, instead of being developed for the benefit of the independent nation and its people. Referring to the enormous human potential and vast natural resources in Africa, Rafsanjani said that the illegitimate presence of foreign powers, with colonial objectives, had prevented development there. "History bears witness to the fact that the big powers lack good will in rendering assistance to other countries and their presence in the Third World countries only aggravates the problems facing those nations," he said. Illustrating the modus operandi of the great powers in Africa, he said, "They come in with milk powder, with weapons, and with some loans from the World Bank. Then they create conflict." He attacked Great Britain, the United States, and France for their role in Africa, and pointed specifically to the Great Lakes region, where foreign powers, he said, are fomenting conflict in order to allow the cartels to take over raw materials. He mentioned Burundi, Rwanda, Zaire, Sudan, and Eritrea in this context. Although, he said, tribal and ethnic problems have existed in these countries, today they are being exploited by outside forces.

Immense resources underutilized

Turning to the question of development, Rafsanjani reported on how, during his Africa tour last year, he had seen immense resources being underutilized. "Since the talent, potentials, and wealth of African nations are undoubtedly admitted by all," he said, "there should not be any justifiable cause for their poverty and various shortages. It gives us great pain to observe such a situation." In Zanzibar, he said, the enormous tuna potential had not been developed; several great rivers on the continent, he said, had created immense stretches



The historic square of Isfahan, the capital of the Safavid Dynasty, from the 16th century to the 18th century. Isfahan was the capital of Persia during this time. The magnificent palaces and mosques are among the greatest achievements of Islamic architecture in the world.

of arable land, which, however, was not being cultivated adequately. He mentioned the problem in Sudan, which has the rich Nile waters, but not enough pumps to take water where it is needed. With very little, he said, a significant increase in economic growth could be generated.

In this context, he also criticized the conditions of trade imposed on African nations from abroad: Instead of being able to trade with one another, or to trade directly with other countries, for example, in the Middle East, African nations are forced to sell their goods to European merchants, who then sell them to other buyers. He pointed to one case of a country which was selling its cashews to a European trader, who then sold them to other buyers, taking 20% off the top. Rafsanjani suggested instead, that value added through processing in the producer country, should go to the benefit of the producer. For this reason, he said, Iran promoted direct bilateral trade relations, and encouraged other countries to do the same.

What Iran can do concretely, he said, is to use its expertise in development, by sending personnel to African countries, or inviting Africans to Iran, for training. One central point made by Rafsanjani, was that it would be less important for

Iran to simply sell its manufactured products to African countries, than to help enable those countries to produce manufactures themselves. Iran's experience in road-building, rail building, dam construction, the oil industry, and so forth, could be usefully exploited by African nations. He proposed that Iran build schools and universities in Africa.

Rafsanjani said, "The Islamic Republic of Iran has good will in its relations with the African nations and its cooperation with them is prompted only by Islamic and humanitarian motives." He urged the participants in the seminar, to come up with concrete proposals for enhancing cooperation with Africa.

What Iran has done in Africa

What the President outlined as policy parameters, was complemented by several speakers, who documented the actual work done by Iran on the continent. The ambassador of the Republic of South Africa, in Teheran, H.E. Moosa Mohammed Molla, noted that the Islamic Republic of Iran, which had cut off relations with the apartheid regime, was among the first to establish relations with the post-apartheid government. The South African diplomat welcomed Iran's



Muriel Mirak Weissbach (at podium, second from left) delivers a speech to the seminar in Teheran on Africa. Chairing the session is Her Excellency Haja Alari Cole (second from right), ambassador of Sierra Leone in the Islamic Republic of Iran.

offer of a “special relationship,” based, he said, on cooperation in the areas of mining, economics, cultural exchange, health, and technology. He pointed out that the diplomacy pursued by Teheran, to develop parity relations with a country of Christian and indigenous African religions, “bridged the cultural divide,” and refuted the notion of an “inevitable clash of civilizations,” promulgated by those spinning scenarios of conflict. Iran, he said, had established diplomatic relations with South Africa, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, Tunisia, Morocco, Libya, Egypt, and Sudan, and was establishing ties with Togo, Gambia, and Uganda. Mozambique, Namibia, and Ghana have relations, although they have not yet opened embassies in Teheran.

Among the achievements of Iran’s foreign policy on the continent, presented by H.E. Abdollah Kashani Movahed, Director of International Affairs of the Iranian Ministry of Industry, are bilateral agreements for infrastructure and the promotion of trade. In addition, Iran has made banking agreements for payment in trade, and has established civil aviation, shipping, telecommunications and postal links. Several other measures have been taken, to encourage relations on a bilateral level, including the abolition or facilitation of visas, legislation to prevent double taxation, and protection of foreign investments.

Kashani pointed to the creation of a High Council for Africa, as indicative of Iran’s commitment to pursue relations with the continent. The council was founded in the wake of Rafsanjani’s 1996 Africa tour, and works under the President’s direction. Perhaps the most crucial factor in Iran’s Africa policy, identified by Kashani, is the access

which African interlocutors will gain, through Iran, to future trade partners throughout Central Asia. “Open access to Iran,” he said, “means access to 15 countries, to members of the Economic Cooperation Organization, and to former Soviet republics.” Kashani cited a March 1997 circular, which guaranteed countries seeking trade with the Central Asian Republics, access without any particular permits. “We are opening markets in Central Asia to all African countries,” he announced.

Recolonization or economic cooperation

The connection of Africa to Central Asia, through Iran, was developed as well, in a paper by Muriel Mirak Weissbach, of *EIR* magazine. Addressing “The Role of the Great Powers in Africa and the Consequences on Relations between Africa and Iran,” she contrasted the raw materials grab strategy of British-led cartels, to a policy of regional peace and security, through economic cooperation. Depicting the strategic goals of the cartels, she drew a grim picture of nation-states being dismantled and populations subjected to genocide, while the cartels move in to secure concessions, protected by private mercenary armies. This onslaught, which is continuing in the Great Lakes region, and threatens to expand to Kenya, Nigeria, and Sudan, she said, should be placed in the context of the imminent collapse of the monetary and financial structures associated with the post-World War II order.

Diametrically opposed to this recolonization drive, she said, was the policy enunciated by Iran, for bilateral trade and economic cooperation agreements. This is an application to Africa of the policy Iran has been pursuing throughout Central



A view of Teheran. Throughout this immense city of over 7 million inhabitants, cranes can be seen, along with other construction equipment. The Iranian government is engaged in a vast project to provide housing for its population, by constructing high-rise apartments, such as those seen here along the city's skyline.

Asia, in cooperation with China, to build the Eurasian Land-Bridge. If Iran has been under attack by British geopolitical circles, because of its commitment to the Land-Bridge program, it is also being assaulted for its analogous approach to Africa. Yet, despite such sabotage, she said, the momentum for the infrastructure development approach had become unstoppable, and must be accelerated at all costs. Here, the speaker proposed that the Eurasian Land-Bridge be extended into Africa, along the lines of the infrastructure projects elaborated and circulated by *EIR*, for transcontinental rail networks, as development corridors. This would allow for the integration of the economies of African nations, and lay the basis for the long-overdue task of industrializing the continent. She concluded by identifying the possibility that the Clinton administration, faced with the financial collapse, could be forced to introduce new monetary structures, and support a perspective for Eurasian and African economic development.

The summary declaration

Several of the themes discussed and recommendations made during the two-day seminar, were picked up in the con-

cluding session, when J. Roshanzamir, Head of Africa Studies, of the Institute for Political and International Studies, presented a summary declaration. The seminar had examined economic policies which could be the foundations for development, he said, and had focussed on the need to increase trade between Iran and African nations. The seminar had reviewed the influence of the Great Powers on the continent, and had considered geopolitical issues, like the collapse of the bipolar system and its effects on regional cooperation in Africa.

Among the recommendations listed, were the following: Iran should expand ties to Africa, in full respect for national sovereignty and independence, and in a spirit of neutrality. Citing Rafsanjani, the final communiqué said that Iran's approach should not be for profit, but for development. This would require the creation of orderly mechanisms between Iran and African countries, within the context of enhancing South-South cooperation. Bilateral relations should be enhanced through the establishment of shipping and airline connections. Human resources should be trained. Iran should rather export technology and services, than manufactured goods: In particular, Iran can use its vast experience in con-



Iranian President Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani (right) received the speakers and diplomatic guests of the "Iran-Africa" seminar, on July 14. In his speech to the group, Rafsanjani outlined the Islamic Republic of Iran's approach to Africa, based on economic cooperation, technology transfer, and respect for national independence and sovereignty.

struction of dams and silos, in Africa. Furthermore, the Silk Road should be extended to Africa, a project in which Iran had a special role to play. There should be a firm stand against colonial powers and vigilance. Iran will expand its relations with Muslim countries of Africa, through the Organization of Islamic Conference. Finally, Iran should expand its university studies programs in Iran and in African countries, and the sponsoring institution, the IPIS, should establish relations with similar institutes in Africa.

Other aspects of foreign policy

Although economic cooperation were the motor force behind Iran's approach to Africa, other vitally important aspects of foreign policy were not overlooked in the seminar. Considerable attention was devoted to questions relating to cultural issues, the relations among different religious communities, and the role of Islamic organizations.

H.E. Ayatollah Taskhiri presented a "Review of the Cultural Situation in Africa, Influence of Western Culture and Ways to Counter and Enhance Cultural Strength of Africa." Ayatollah Taskhiri began with a few key statistics that summarize the plight of Africa's populations. Although the continent has over 600 million people, it accounts for only 4% of international exports. The annual income of the entire continent, he said, equalled that of the Netherlands, which has only one-tenth the population. In this situation of poverty and underdevelopment, where despair leads to crime, the speaker reviewed the role of certain Christian churches on the continent. Stressing the fact that most of the new Christian communities implanted there, numbering in the thousands, were introduced by the colonial powers, he identified cases in which

church organizations were being "used and misused by foreign forces." In particular, he criticized certain sects presenting themselves as Christians, who claim special powers from Jesus Christ, to heal the sick, and perform other miracles. As for Islam, the religious leader reported on the establishment of theological schools, in Ghana, Sierra Leone, Tanzania, and Kenya, as well as of universities, especially the African university in Sudan, where students from 44 African countries come to study.

The "Cultural Influences of Foreign Powers on Africa: An Overview," was presented by H.E. Haja Alari Cole, the ambassador of Sierra Leone in Teheran. In her paper, Ambassador Cole illustrated the richness of African culture, and the wide variety of ethnic groups and linguistic communities, and their associated traditions, arts, and technologies. With the 19th-century scramble for Africa, Western customs and languages were introduced, according to the policies of "assimilation," in the French and Portuguese territories, and "indirect rule," among the British territories. Ambassador Cole complained that "Western tastes were acquired more quickly than Western skills," such that European dress was adopted, for example, but not the means to produce it. The resultant "cultural confusion" in Africa, she said, could be overcome, if the way could be found of "re-establishing some old values in the process of modernization." Ambassador Cole stressed, this did not mean returning to pre-colonial days, but, strengthening African identity in harmony with the process of development. In this context, she evaluated the experience of several African countries, with Iran; they "have embarked on positive policies ranging from technological exportation to training of human resources, to



The Islamic Republic of Iran has implemented an ambitious infrastructure development policy, providing the country with modern three- and four-lane highways, as well as extensive railway networks.

broaden the scope of cooperation.”

The common religious heritage of Islam, was considered by several speakers as a great advantage in striving to encourage African economic development. In particular, the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC), was identified as a vehicle for promoting such cooperation. Hamid Hadian, an expert on international affairs, spoke at the seminar on “The Forthcoming OIC Summit Conference in Teheran: A Groundwork for Development of Institutionalized Cooperation with Muslim African Nations.”

Hadian argued that, “in the absence of the traditional ideological rivalries between the United States and the former Soviet Union, common cultural and religious beliefs have prepared the groundwork for greater cooperation among Muslim nations.” These, which comprise one-fourth the world’s population, represent 20% of the world’s land mass, and possess massive oil and gas reserves, could turn into a powerful bloc, he said.

Hadian turned to the OIC, which, he said, had been “founded to pursue political goals,” but proposed that it be utilized as a vehicle for economic progress. “The African Muslim nations, with their enormous economic and trade potentials, rich natural resources, high populations, and geopolitical conditions, on the one hand, and political, economic, and cultural changes, on the other, have the ability

to institutionalize their cooperation in the context of the OIC, thus strengthening their economic cooperation, as the best strategy for upgrading their position in international relations.” Hadian proposed as well that Iran make use of the OIC’s “specialized committees and the Islamic Common Market for the development of economic and trade relations with Muslim African countries,” as well as of industrialization.

The proposal floated at the seminar, to recast the function of the OIC, is of immediate relevance, considering that Teheran will host the summit of that organization, in December 1997. In fact, as the seminar was taking place, Iranian Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Velayati was conducting a tour of African Muslim countries, to deliver the invitation from President Rafsanjani for the summit, to the heads of state. The Presidents of Gambia, Guinea, Mali, Niger, Togo, Benin, Chad, Gabon, and the Comoros, announced their acceptance of the invitation, and pledged to participate actively in the conference. Speaking to the press on his return, Velayati noted that the officials and the people of the countries he visited harbored a special respect for Islam and Iran. While referring to the fact that the overwhelming majority of African nations are members of the OIC, Velayati noted that apart from relations in the political field, good ties can also be built in the economic and commercial spheres.