

# Beijing Summit Puts Spotlight on Africa

by William Jones

In the largest diplomatic gathering ever held in Beijing, 48 African leaders, including 26 Presidents and 6 Prime Ministers, gathered Nov. 3-6 at the 2006 Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC). The summit is the climax of an intense diplomatic effort by China to establish a close working partnership with the nations of Africa. China is enhancing its traditional role as the largest developing country, in order to assist other developing countries on the path to economic development. This contrasts sharply with the major powers of the developed world, including the United States, who have largely written off Africa as a target for development, and left it to suffer rapacious plundering by the international financial cartels.

The fact that most of Africa's 53 countries attended the Beijing Summit, mostly at a head-of-state or head-of-government level, shows how successful the Chinese diplomacy has been.

Numerous delegations of Chinese officials have been criss-crossing the African continent over the last six years, bringing with them investment and teams of experts to assist the African nations in the areas of energy, infrastructure, medicine, and agriculture. The Chinese are also bringing their own technology and know-how to bear on the problems of Africa. In April, President Hu Jintao himself visited three African countries, while in June Premier Wen Jiabao made a whirlwind tour of seven African nations. Egypt's President Hosni Mubarak and Ethiopian President Meles Zenawi co-chaired the Beijing event, which was hosted by President Hu.

In his opening speech on Nov. 4, President Hu presented a number of measures that China planned to take to promote Sino-African Cooperation. These included: 1) doubling China's assistance to Africa by 2009, from its 2006 level; 2) providing \$3 billion in preferential loans and \$2 billion in preferential buyer's credits to the continent in the next five years; 3) setting up a \$5 billion development fund to encourage Chinese investment in Africa; and 4) cancelling all the interest-free government loans to the most heavily indebted poor countries in Africa, which matured at the end of 2005. In addition, President Hu promised to train 15,000 African professionals, to set up 10 special agricultural technology demonstration centers, to build 30 hospitals and 100 rural schools, to dispatch 300 youth volunteers and 100 agricultural experts to Africa. Addressing some African concerns that Chinese products will compete with their own domestic pro-

duction, China has also agreed to increase, from 190 to 440, the number of export items from the least-developed countries in Africa to which China grants zero-tariff treatment.

## A Way Out of Poverty?

China of course has its own particular interests in helping Africa. With its growing population of over 1.3 billion people, China needs to secure its raw materials and energy resources in order to maintain the rate of growth necessary to overcome the still-rampant poverty in the largely rural country. But for the African nations, this is definitely not a one-way street. China has provided its own experts and capital for major projects in most of the African nations. China, like the United States, has had no colonial tradition, and therefore has achieved a great degree of trust among these developing nations, not only as a source of credit and capital, but as a successful model of a developing country that has begun to work its way out of poverty. The United States, on the other hand, has tended, especially since the death of President Kennedy, who was revered in Africa, to ally itself with the former colonial nations, and has thereby, to a great extent, squandered the goodwill it once had.

The Forum on China-Africa Cooperation was set up in October 2000, and has held two ministerial conferences, one in Beijing, and one in Addis Abeba. This continues a tradition that goes back to 1944, when Zhou Enlai took the initiative to hold a conference of African and Asian nations to discuss the issues of independence and development in the Third World.

The third and final day of the summit included an entrepreneurs' conference, attended by 1,500 entrepreneurs representing over 400 Chinese and African firms. Dozens of agreements were signed, totalling \$1.9 billion, in areas such as infrastructure, telecommunications, pharmaceuticals, energy, and mining. The parties decided they will set up a Joint China-Africa Chamber of Commerce. China will establish three to five trade and economic cooperation zones in Africa over the next three years. In his address to the entrepreneurs' meeting, Premier Wen promised to double trade between China and Africa by 2009.

The conference also was the occasion for dozens of bilateral meetings between Chinese and African leaders.

While the promise of the Beijing Summit has dramatically refocused the world's attention on Africa, with a pivotal role for China as the largest developing country, it would be an illusion to think that China alone, with its own immense problems of poverty and underdevelopment, will be able to do more than make a dent in the problems facing Africa. Under the present bankrupt financial system, Africa has been condemned to die. Only if the powers of the West, particularly the United States, return to sanity, and focus their efforts on aiding the infrastructural development of Africa, can the effects of decades of neglect and genocide be remedied.