

South America-Africa: Leaders resolve to forge union

Written by Humberto Márquez
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PORLAMAR, Venezuela, Sep. 27, 2009 (IPS/GIN) - A declaration signed over the weekend at the second South America-Africa summit outlined the views of the developing South with a commitment to cooperate in the fight against poverty.

Eight South American and 20 African presidents, along with a number of vice presidents, prime ministers, foreign ministers and other senior officials from a total of 61 countries attended the two-day gathering, which was considered a success by the participants, after the much less impressive attendance at the first summit, held in Abuja, the capital of Nigeria, three years ago.

In the 30-page final declaration, the leaders expressed their complete support for reforms of the U.N. Security Council that would guarantee greater participation by the developing countries of South America and Africa and improve its functioning, with a view to redressing the current imbalances.

President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva of Brazil, which aspires to a permanent seat on the U.N. Security Council – whose permanent members are China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom and the United States – said the Security Council had lost relevance, adding that "we must work together to reform it."

The declaration states the need to solve in a peaceful manner any problem or dispute that could endanger regional or global security, although it also defends appropriate and effective measures against any threat to peace caused by the proliferation of "chemical, biological or nuclear weapons."

In his address, Libyan President Muammar Gaddafi proposed the creation of a South America-Africa South Atlantic defense organization, along the lines of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO).

But the idea expressed by the Libyan leader, who currently chairs the African Union, was not included in the final declaration and did not receive the backing of other speakers.

Gaddafi also reiterated criticism of the U.N. system that he voiced a few days earlier in New York. In addition, he lashed out at the military powers that have sown landmines in countries of the developing South, while defending the use of landmines by poor countries, for defensive purposes.

The final declaration, however, condemns the production and use of anti-personnel landmines by any country.

It also condemns racism, discrimination and trafficking of persons, and underlines the importance of fostering the exchange of experiences with respect to the rights of women, children, adolescents, the elderly and the disabled.

The document calls on Britain to urgently negotiate the question of the sovereignty of the Malvinas/Falklands, South Georgia and South Sandwich Islands with Argentina and the sovereignty of the Chagos archipelago with Mauritius, while urging France to negotiate the

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issue of Mayotte island with Comoros.

In addition, the declaration reasserts the commitment to intensify efforts to eradicate poverty and hunger in the context of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).

Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) Director-General Jacques Diouf, who attended the summit, underlined that for the first time in history more than one billion people in the world are hungry.

"But in contrast, for the first time there are sufficient resources in the world to solve the problem of hunger," said Ecuadorean President Rafael Correa, who holds the rotating presidency of the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR).

The leaders also spoke out in favor of bi-regional cooperation in the areas of food and agriculture, and expressed an interest in taking part in the next FAO food security summit, slated for November in Rome.

Argentine President Cristina Fernández said the emerging cooperation between Africa and South America could give rise to a new model of trade that would include the transfer of technology and generate jobs.

"Argentina can offer technology, expertise and machinery, so that Africa doesn't have to depend on charity from international missions, but can produce its food itself," said Fernández.

Another frequently mentioned issue was the question of energy and mining. The leaders agreed to share and exchange experiences in terms of energy sources and savings, especially clean, renewable and alternative sources.

The two regions also agreed to cooperate in areas related to the production and sustainable use of oil and gas.

After virtually every speech that touched on the issue, Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez underscored the potential of the two regions, which together hold one-quarter of the planet's oil reserves.

Over the weekend, Venezuela and Equatorial Guinea, which produces nearly 400,000 barrels per day of oil but has no refinery, signed agreements with Mauritius and Niger to study the construction of a refinery in West Africa.

On the environmental front, the African and South American leaders stressed that the nations of the industrialized North are historically responsible for global warming and must cut their greenhouse gas emissions.

They also supported a special fund to help strengthen developing countries' capacity to confront climate-related disasters.

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On the sidelines of the summit, the presidents of seven South American countries - Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Ecuador, Paraguay, Uruguay and Venezuela – signed the foundational document of the Bank of the South, which will have 20 billion dollars in startup capital, of which Brasilia, Buenos Aires and Caracas will provide 12 billion dollars in equal parts.

Chávez suggested that the bank, which will fund anti-poverty and development projects, hold foreign reserves of countries of South America, because "keeping them in banks of the North so that they make us loans using our own money is silly."

He also said the Bank of the South should forge an alliance with a similar institution in Africa, in order to create a major "South-South" bank to finance development programs.

"I even have a name for it: it could be called Bancasa (for ASA – Africa-South America – as the summits are known)," said Chávez. Several African presidents indicated that they liked the idea.

The declaration says the two regions are committed to fomenting anti-drug initiatives, proposals, actions and activities at both the bilateral and bioregional level.

Bolivia's request that the traditional use of coca leaves by indigenous peoples be recognized caused friction and delayed agreement on the question of drugs. In the end, a clause was inserted in the chapter on culture, stating that the leaders took note that the chewing of coca leaves is a cultural tradition of the Bolivian people, which should be respected by the international community.

Chávez offered facilities to house an ASA summit secretariat on Margarita Island, and the leaders agreed on a follow-up mechanism, based on sectoral working groups led by high-level officials who will meet in the next few months to present proposals to a gathering of foreign ministers to take place within the next year.

The third ASA summit will be held in 2011 in Libya.