

(MFI) Five years after the approval of the Millennium Development Goals (MDG) aimed at combating world poverty, Africa, which has fallen behind in its efforts to achieve them, is topping the political and economic agenda of the international community.

The reasons for Africa's return to the front pages are multiple and varied: Western leaders want to clear their conscience, and they at the same time recognise the need for solidarity between rich and poor in order to fight international terrorism and clandestine immigration, increasingly viewed as a threat, notably in Europe. All this against the background of skyrocketing oil prices over the past two years, due in part to the spectacular entry of raw materials-hungry China into the select club of major economic powers. Africa has large oil reserves – although they are far less significant than those in the Middle East, still unstable and shaken by the shockwaves from the war in Iraq. The Chinese "tsunami" sweeping Africa – and not only its oil-producing countries – is a new fact of life that will henceforth have to be taken into account.

While the main actors on the world scene had differing views of the Anglo-American intervention in Iraq, there is a broad consensus about the need to assist Africa. But in spite of the new commitments in favour of boosting official development assistance (ODA) and agreement on debt cancellation for the poorest countries, much more will have to be done. The Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) has estimated world military spending in 2004 at over 1,000 billion dollars, or 2.6 percent of the world's combined gross national product (GNP). By comparison, total ODA did not exceed 80 billion dollars last year, and will still fall short of 130 billion in 2010, even if the donor community keeps its latest promises.

Special UN Summit disappoints Kofi Annan

The renewed interest in Africa, where peacekeeping operations have multiplied after the end of the taboos of the late 1990s – born out of the ill-fated United States intervention in Somalia and the criticism of French policy at the time of the Rwanda genocide – has coincided with this year's major international conferences. The special United Nations Summit in New York in September 2005, devoted to a discussion of the proposed reform of the 60-year old world organisation, and a review of progress towards the MDG adopted by the international community in 2000, thus focused mainly on Africa. But the poorer countries deplore the fact that their main concerns were overshadowed by political quarrels over whether to enlarge the Security Council and the definition of terrorism.

Agreement on enlargement proved elusive, both among the five permanent member countries, the P5 – Britain, China, France, the United States and Russia – which have the right of veto, and even more so among the candidate countries, from North and South. Agreement could not be reached on any of the three proposals tabled in New York. The first, presented by the so-called G4 (Brazil, Germany, India and Japan) proposed increasing the Council's membership from 15 to 25, including six new permanent seats – one each for the G4 countries and two for Africa – without necessarily giving them the right of veto. This plan faced sharp hostility from the Africans, who used their weight in the UN General Assembly to block it. In so doing *"and by submitting maximalist demands, they shot themselves in the foot,"* according to several diplomatic experts. The Africans, who remained sharply divided on the choice of their own candidates, indeed proposed adding 11 Council seats, including two permanent with the right of veto and five non-permanent ones for their continent. The third proposal was submitted by a group of states led by Italy, calling itself *United for a consensus*, which advocated the extension of the Council to 25 members, without any right of veto for the new members. Political divisions in the end prevented any consensus. It should be noted that none of the P5 countries made any special effort to secure a deal.

UN Secretary General Kofi Annan, personally weakened by the scandal surrounding the *Oil for food programme* in Iraq, was unable to conceal a measure of disappointment after the New York Summit. The present period is certainly *"full of extraordinary promises that could turn poverty into ancient history"*, he said. However, three years after the UN Conference on Finance for development at Monterrey (Mexico) in March 2002, the efforts of donor countries are still insufficient.

Chirac, Blair, Bush: initiatives, promises of support

Beyond the summitry, key Western leaders are regularly reiterating their interest for Africa. President Jacques Chirac has gone out of his way to highlight France's role as the main advocate of the Third World in general, and Africa in particular, even if it does not have the means of acting alone. As early as 2003, at the Africa-France Summit in Paris, the French president mooted the idea of a *"solidarity tax"* to finance development, and also called for a moratorium on export subsidies for farm produce exported to Africa, a proposal that remains on the table. The African countries, on the other hand, are calling for the full elimination of agricultural subsidies in rich countries, which penalise their own exports.

The solidarity tax concept has now taken shape with the idea of an international levy on airline tickets. France has secured the support of Germany, Algeria, Brazil, Chile and Spain, as well as Britain. However, the project has still to be endorsed by the international community as a whole; the Americans are notably allergic to any idea of new taxes. However, Paris is set to host a ministerial conference in February 2006 on the implementation of such a levy, the revenue from which would initially serve for the struggle against AIDS, tuberculosis and malaria, and, partly, at a later stage, be used to repay the International Finance Facility (IFF) proposed by Britain.

Britain's Prime Minister Tony Blair, who has drawn international criticism for his stalwart support for US President George Bush in Iraq, has been seeking to improve his image by taking a stand in favour of Africa. Using his position as host of the G8 Summit and president of the European Union (EU) for the second half of 2005, he proposed and secured commitments from his partners on an increase in ODA flows and further debt relief for the poorest countries.

The EU Commission is meanwhile developing a new strategy for Africa, while the World Bank, now under the leadership of Paul Wolfowitz, a former American Hawk on Iraq, is preparing to implement a three-year plan of action for the continent.

As for President Bush, who is seeking to please Americans of African origin while keeping an eye on the continent's oil reserves, he has repeatedly assured the Africans of United States support. When Africans seize their opportunity America will be their partner and friend, he says. *"We seek progress in Africa and throughout the developing world because our interests are directly at stake,"* he said last June, *"On September 11, 2001, Americans found that instability and lawlessness in a distant country can bring danger to our own."*

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