

Commonwealth Lecture
14 March 2000
Africa: Maintaining the Momentum
KOFI ANNAN

Mr Secretary-General, Chief Emeka Anyaoku, Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen: It is an honour to be here with you today and to join in this year's commemoration of Commonwealth Day.

I would like to begin by paying tribute to the tenure, now ending, of my good friend Chief Emeka Anyaoku. His service as your Secretary-General has coincided with a remarkable transformation of the international arena. Through waves of democratisation and globalisation, while East-West, North-South and countless other relationships have undergone fundamental change, Chief Anyaoku has steered a productive course. I know how much pain it caused him when his own country suffered under military rulers, whose behaviour your Organisation was obliged to condemn. But he held fast to his principles, and his reward is that he can now return to a Nigeria restored to constitutional, democratic rule. He has also been a steadfast advocate for a strong and effective United Nations.

He leaves in the hands of his successor a Commonwealth that is not only larger but also more responsive to the needs of its diverse constituents. Chief Anyaoku has earned the gratitude of the international community, and we should all wish him well.

Let me also welcome your new Secretary-General, Don McKinnon. Having just visited New Zealand, I can tell you that he brings to his new position knowledge of a country that works. The world is not all conflict and poverty. Some nations, more fortunate than others in their history and geography, go about their business quietly yet effectively – not without problems but with solid frameworks of law and trained personnel to deal with those problems.

New Zealand is one such place, and it has a record of sharing those advantages with other Commonwealth countries that stand to benefit from them.

Mr McKinnon has a deep understanding of the United Nations, which will strengthen ties between our two organisations. I know I speak for all of us in wishing him the best as he assumes his new responsibilities at Marlborough House.

The Commonwealth is a unique member of the international community. It has long since outgrown its colonial origins to become a multilateral, multiregional, multicultural and, yes, even multi-lingual organisation, united in its commitment to democracy, good governance, human rights and sustainable development. With membership representing roughly one out of every four people on this earth, the Commonwealth is truly one of the United Nations' leading sister bodies.

That close relationship compels me to speak today about Africa – a place and a cause that is very close to – indeed, is inseparable from – the missions of both our organisations. African nations make up the largest single grouping within the Commonwealth, and – at least until Tuvalu joins us later this year – they make up the largest single grouping within the United Nations as well. For many years the struggle

against apartheid was one of the highest priorities for both of us. More recently we have both sent electoral observers to many African countries, to help consolidate democratic processes. We both have substantial programmes of technical assistance. For more than half a century we have championed African rights and self-sufficiency, and marshalled international support for African development.

And yet, for all that we have done to help Africa overcome its conflicts and false starts and lost decades, I am afraid to say it has not been enough. Africa needs more: more assistance, more technology, more investment, more access to world markets, more co-operation and partnership.

At the dawn of the new millennium, Africans find themselves at a critical juncture. Conflicts continue in almost all regions – conflicts which have swelled the ranks of refugees and internally displaced persons and in which combatants show total disregard for the welfare of civilians.

Some of these conflicts have completely vanished from the headlines and news bulletins in more fortunate parts of the world. Yet in Angola, fighting continues unchecked. In southern Sudan, the cease-fire is observed more in name than in fact. In Somalia, there is still no recognised government, and clashes between rival groups remain frequent. The war between Eritrea and Ethiopia is now in its third year, having already taken an estimated fifty-five thousand lives. Eight million people in Ethiopia are now threatened, yet again, by a famine for which human folly will be largely to blame.

Yet these conflicts go almost unreported. And if from the world media you would not even know that there had been a conflict in the Republic of Congo – ‘Congo-Brazzaville’ – let alone that it is one of Africa’s grimmest humanitarian emergencies. I’m glad to say the recent political news from there has been encouraging, but thousands of displaced people remain in acute need.

Nothing can excuse the stubbornness of those who persist in using violence against their fellow men and women. But nor can the guilt of a few unscrupulous leaders excuse the callous indifference with which most of the world treats the victims of these near-forgotten wars. And yet, terrible as it is, conflict is not even the worst of Africa’s ills. The impact of HIV and AIDS – the threat it poses to economic, social and political stability – is proving to be no less destructive.

Last year, AIDS killed far more people than all the region’s conflicts combined. And of 36 million people now living with AIDS worldwide, 23 million are in sub-Saharan Africa. In Côte d’Ivoire, a teacher dies of AIDS every school day. The average child born in Botswana today has a life expectancy of 41 years, when without AIDS it would have been 70.

Government projections in Zimbabwe indicate that HIV and AIDS will consume 60 per cent of the nation’s health budget by 2005, and even that will be wholly inadequate. None of us has yet begun to grasp the full impact of this horror – on the quality of life in Africa, its economic potential, and its social and political stability.

The truth is, Africa is suffering from multiple crises – ecological, economic, social and political. Fresh water, forests and arable lands are under unprecedented stress. Billions of dollars of public funds continue to be stashed away by some African leaders, even while roads are crumbling, health systems have failed, school-children have neither books nor desks nor teachers, and the phones do not work.

And the background to all this is, of course, poverty. The latest estimates indicate that a larger proportion of the people in sub-Saharan Africa live on less than one dollar a day than in any other region of the world. Poverty makes Africans more vulnerable to war and disease. And war and disease constantly thwart Africans' efforts to lift themselves out of poverty.

It gives me no pleasure to recite this litany of deprivation and despair. But we cannot hope to solve problems unless we first look them squarely in the face. African leaders themselves are among the first to acknowledge the mistakes of the past and the need for fundamental change.

And in many places, change is happening. The overall picture is not one of unrelieved gloom. There are other images of Africa, much more positive, much more forward-looking, which also ring true.

The era of coups d'état, single-party monopoly of power and winner-take-all politics is giving way, thankfully, to a steady progression of multiparty democratic elections, restoration of constitutional rule, and the beginnings of greater transparency, accountability and respect for fundamental human rights.

It was surely a sign of the times when, at last year's Organisation of African Unity (OAU) Summit in Algiers, African leaders decided that those who came to power through unconstitutional means would not be welcome at future summits. Since then, where changes of government in Africa have taken place unconstitutionally, there has been overwhelming international pressure to ensure the speediest possible return to legitimacy. And in one case a former dictator, accused of torturing thousands of his fellow-citizens, has been arrested in another African country and faces possible extradition.

Difficult political problems in the Central African Republic, Guinea-Bissau and Niger have been resolved relatively peacefully, with successful multiparty elections and smooth transitions to new governments. A border dispute between Botswana and Namibia, which at one stage threatened to escalate dangerously, has been submitted to international arbitration, and both sides have accepted the findings of the International Court of Justice.

I have already mentioned the return of multi-party constitutional rule to Africa's most populous country, Nigeria. In the last few weeks all of us have been watching the upsurge of communal violence there with great apprehension. But no one should have imagined that a country of more than 100 million people, with great ethnic and confessional diversity would make the transition from dictatorship to democracy without encountering some problems along the road. What is important is that we should all support President Obasanjo's firm commitment to human rights and the

rule of law, and his courageous efforts to combat corruption, reform public life and rehabilitate the economy.

South Africa, the other giant of Africa, has made an admirably smooth transition from the era of President Mandela to that of President Mbeki, following an exemplary democratic electoral process. Not long ago, chaos and bloodshed seemed to be South Africa's ineluctable destiny. Instead, today we see – not a problem-free South Africa of course, but a people tackling its problems through the mechanisms of multi-racial, multi-party democracy, with a constitution which sets new standards in upholding fundamental rights and enshrining the rule of law.

And now President Mandela himself – seemingly tireless even at the age of eighty-one – has placed his enormous prestige and wisdom at the service of fellow Africans in a country still bitterly divided by ethnic conflict. As you know, he has taken on the mantle of the otherwise irreplaceable Mwalimu Julius Nyerere – whose loss we all feel so acutely – by accepting the arduous role of Facilitator in the Burundi peace process.

Only a few weeks ago I would have rounded off this list of inspiring examples of Africans pulling themselves up from disaster with a lyrical tribute to Mozambique. In the space of a decade – and I am proud to say with the help of the United Nations – Mozambique lifted itself from the throes of a terrible civil war to achieve remarkable, sustained levels of economic growth, combined with democratic government.

Those achievements make the current natural disaster all the more poignant. It is bitterly ironic that the Economist Intelligence Unit had singled out Mozambique as likely to have the highest growth rate in Africa this year. But at least that means we know the government and people there can make good use of any aid they receive. Let me appeal once again to the whole world to give them as much help as possible, and as soon as possible.

Mozambique is a good example of a country which has managed to get both its politics and its economics on the right path. More and more African leaders are showing themselves determined to follow that example, and to confront squarely the obstacles that, until now, have prevented Africa from becoming a full partner in the global economy.

At long last, the ubiquitous state-owned commodity marketing bodies, which used to cream off the earnings of the long-suffering African farmer, have made way for new arrangements that give the producer a fair price for his or her crops. Bloated and inefficient public-service structures are being reformed. Local government, long neglected and starved of resources, is gradually getting the attention it needs.

Last year, the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development published a study showing that investment in Africa brings a higher return to American and Japanese companies than any other region of the world. More than twenty-five African countries have undertaken far-reaching structural economic reform, including privatisation of loss-making state enterprises, and measures to eliminate distorted exchange rates and commodity prices. Stock exchanges, new modern communications

facilities, and other signs of economic progress can be found in more and more African countries.

This is the Africa we must have in mind when we talk of sustaining the momentum. The international community must reinforce such positive signals. Indeed, it is this very progress, and not only conflict, that has made the international community devote more attention to Africa, as it did with January's 'Month of Africa' in the United Nations Security Council. There is a sense that this is a moment when outside assistance has a real chance of bearing fruit. I would like to suggest some directions for our work in the immediate future.

I know I risk sounding like a broken record if I begin with debt, trade and official development assistance. But the fact remains that more must be done in these areas if Africans are to have any hope of economic and social progress.

Africa's massive and unsustainable external debt remains a major obstacle to growth. It deters private investment, threatens the sustainability of reforms, disrupts the smooth functioning of the State – and calls into question the very survival of some African economies. At present we are congratulating ourselves on small steps which have brought modest relief to a handful of countries. The deeper, faster and broader relief promised last year has yet to materialise.

In the same vein, both the level and the quality of official development assistance leave a great deal to be desired. Overseas Development Assistance (ODA) has declined significantly – because of budget constraints in donor countries, because of a mistaken belief that private capital flows have rendered ODA obsolete, and, perhaps most damagingly, because there is diminishing confidence that it can work.

Some African countries are attracting impressive levels of foreign investment, but many have been bypassed, leaving ODA as their only source of new capital.

More importantly, World Bank studies show that ODA can work, as long as it is well targeted – for example at high impact areas such as water, education and health, and at countries which have adopted policies enabling all their people to benefit. While continuing to advocate higher levels of aid, we must be sure we make best use of what we already have.

But ultimately, Africans do not want to rely on external aid. Like anyone else in the world, they yearn for the self-respect which comes from earning your own living in a fair exchange of goods and services. In other words, they want to trade their way out of poverty and dependence.

But African exports still face high tariffs in many sectors. If industrialised countries did more to open their markets, African countries could increase their exports by many billions of dollars per year – far more than they now receive in aid. For millions of poor people this could make the difference between their present misery and a decent life.

And yet the cost for the rich countries would be minuscule. I made this appeal in Seattle last November, and last month at UNCTAD X in Bangkok. I repeat it here today.

Development, of course, is more than money, more than institutions, and more than bricks and mortar. Nothing will happen or take hold without trained personnel. Investment in human resources is essential. Today, more and more, that means training in the skills of the new information technologies.

The internet is no substitute for vaccines, of course, and basic literacy comes before computer literacy. But the new information technologies have enormous potential to improve the lot of ordinary Africans – through long-distance learning and medical care, by helping more women join the workforce, and by making public administration more transparent, to name just a few areas. They could enable African societies to leapfrog some long and painful stages in the development process.

But none of this will happen in countries that continue to be ravaged by conflict. And it will be difficult even in African countries far away from the actual fighting if they are affected by fallout – for instance through refugee flows – or by what warfare does for Africa's overall image. So those who sincerely wish to help Africa prosper must also help contain and resolve its conflicts, and to prevent new ones from breaking out.

First of all they must take firmer steps to ensure that they themselves, or their less responsible citizens, are not profiting from Africa's misfortunes. We have all decried the baleful impact of international arms dealers, mercenaries, and those who buy diamonds or other precious minerals from African rebel groups. It is high time we did something about them. The Security Council Sanctions Committee for Angola has taken some significant first steps against those who gain from a nation's descent into war. Its approach must be applied more widely, and supplemented by other measures aimed at war profiteers, whether conscious or merely negligent.

Africa is making courageous efforts to develop the capacity to deal with its own conflicts and crises, and particularly to do its own peacekeeping, at both the regional and sub-regional level.

This is a healthy development, and deserves more than verbal encouragement. The world should, so to speak, put its money where its mouth is.

But that cannot and must not be a substitute for the direct engagement of the wider international community in these tasks. It cannot be right to leave the people of the world's poorest and most conflict-ridden continent to fend for themselves. The United Nations Security Council has the primary responsibility for maintaining peace and security throughout the world. I am confident that it will not shirk that responsibility.

Let me conclude by mentioning two countries, at different stages in the search for peace, where the United Nations has taken or is taking on very direct responsibilities right now.

In Sierra Leone, we now have a large peacekeeping force on the ground and are doing everything we can to help implement last year's Lomé Agreement, which has brought a real, if still fragile, hope of lasting peace to the country.

And in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the Security Council has authorised a mission to monitor the cease-fire and facilitate the implementation of other provisions of the Lusaka Peace Agreements, including the 'national dialogue' between Congolese parties.

It has given me the heavy responsibility of deciding when conditions are ripe for deployment of this mission – and my Under-Secretary-General for Peacekeeping Operations, Bernard Miyet, is currently in the region making an on-the-spot assessment.

But let me not give the impression that peacekeeping is the only service the United Nations provides in Africa. That would only perpetuate the myth that peacekeeping is the UN's major line of work. In fact, the lion's share of our work is in development, and Africa is at the core of that effort.

The United Nations will not rest until Africa is on a more secure path towards peace and prosperity. And I personally will not relent until the recommendations of my report on the Causes of Conflict and Promotion of Durable Peace and Sustainable Development in Africa, now almost two years old, are likewise being taken seriously by those with the power to implement them.

In the months ahead, you will see a number of major United Nations initiatives and events with direct consequence for African peace and prosperity: in April, the launch in Senegal of a major programme on girls' education, which many experts say is the key element in sustainable development; in May or June, the launch of the UN-wide strategic partnership for HIV/AIDS; in June, major reviews of the Beijing conference on women and Copenhagen conference on social development; and then the series of millennium events in August and September.

The agenda for Africa is clear. The calendar is full of opportunities to turn things around. President Thabo Mbeki likes to say about today's South Africa that 'the building has begun' – and I think one could say the same of Africa as a whole. In spite of all the continent's problems, the time has come when help from global organisations like the United Nations and the Commonwealth may be decisive. We must not fail Africa now.

Thank you very much.