

YAOUNDE INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE

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WELCOME SPEECH BY H.E. PAUL BIYA, PRESIDENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF CAMEROON

Yaounde, 18 May 2010

Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It gives me great pleasure and honour to welcome to Yaounde, on behalf of the Cameroonian people, so many eminent personalities who hold or have held senior positions at the helm of State, in politics, human sciences, culture, humanitarian intervention and many other domains.

Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I wish you a warm welcome to Cameroon and a very pleasant stay in Yaounde.

Through the hazards of history, Cameroon's independence on 1 January 1960 was followed by that of 17 other African countries. We therefore deemed it necessary, on the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of the accession of these countries to sovereignty, to review the situation of our continent and take a prospective look at its chances in the decades ahead.

Of course, we are fully aware that others had preceded us in the march towards freedom. Close to us were Ghana and Guinea. In the northern part of the continent, there were those that had been protectorates, as well as those which, despite remaining officially sovereign, had had to submit.

In none of them had the dark colonial past of scarcely a century erased the memory of the Kingdoms of the Maghreb, the great empires of sub-Saharan Africa, or that of the ancient civilizations of the Sahel or

of the Upper Nile valley, whose Africanness can no longer be called into question.

To complete this background, need I recall the disaster of slave trade and this slow alienation, which was colonization?

Then came INDEPENDENCE.

Probably for a long time to come, historians will continue to debate as to whether this independence, whether won, conceded or negotiated, as the case may be, was genuine or not, since in our minds, we still had ways of thinking, behaviours and even modes of expression that were not originally ours. However, would it cross any one's mind to question the authenticity of old European civilizations inherited from Athens or Rome?

The essential point is elsewhere. We were independent because we wanted to be independent.

Let us rather ask the real question. What have we done with our independence?

We had to start by building our states. It was no easy task. Our officers were few and inexperienced. With our students just returning from abroad and the early batches from our training schools, our administration took shape progressively. We had to put in place an army and a police force quite often in a context of tension. We also needed diplomacy to make our maiden entry onto the international scene.

Starting from the bottom, we extended our school system upwards, up to the universities which were non-existent at the beginning of the process. We also started putting in place a health system that was still at a budding stage.

For most of our countries, an economy that relied on cash crops for export to the former colonial powers was beyond our grasp. Credit was in the hands of foreign banks. The large majority of our people were confined to subsistence and the informal economy. Only progressively did they engage in export farming, trade and small enterprises. Our learning of the economy has taken place in state-owned enterprises with the well-known vicissitudes.

We have undoubtedly proceeded by trial and error. But could it have been otherwise? I have mentioned our unpreparedness and inexperience. I could as well have included hunger, pandemics, civil war, external pressure and even corruption to justify our failures. We prefer to accept responsibility and say: “we have done our best”.

By the way, can we talk of failures? For, if we think about it carefully, most of us inherited vast territories, without geographical harmony, without ethnic homogeneity, without cultural cohesion, and without linguistic uniformity. And each one of us, with disparate puzzle pieces, has done what took old nations centuries to accomplish.

Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I hope that you will excuse me for this brief passionate return to the past which was only meant to put into perspective the preconceived ideas on Africa’s development since the independence era.

Since the book entitled “L’Afrique noire est mal partie” (“False start in Africa”), by René Dumont, the supposed failures of bilateral cooperation, the questioning of development models of international organizations, the systematic criticism of structural adjustment, what has not been said about our continent’s wrong development approach? So much so that we do not know which way to turn.

At one point, globalization raised hopes for our economic takeoff. Provided, we were told, we did not let ourselves be sidelined. The old demons however resurfaced: deterioration of the terms of trade, unfair competition through subsidies, decline in official development assistance, etc. The economic and financial crisis has done the rest: drop in the prices of our commodities, collapse of our exports, deferral of foreign investments, with all their implications.

Things could not have been otherwise since the rules governing our relations with the industrialized world had not really changed. We stayed on the sidelines of the global economy. We remained the suppliers of oil, raw materials and commodities over whose prices we had no control. Furthermore, the costs of our imports continued to rise, just like those of transport, credit, etc.

Under such circumstances, how were we to ensure our development? How were we to build our infrastructure, roads, dams, power plants? How were we to exploit our mineral deposits and implement our major agricultural and agro-industrial projects? In short, how were we to modernize our countries and get them out of the economic ghetto to which they were confined?

The coming of emerging countries onto the scene raises hopes. After a sluggish start, they have become bolder and are proposing solutions tailored to our needs and means. Of course, the idea is not to systematically replace one group by another, but simply to tackle the problems we are facing in our best interest.

For a long time, we believed in the advent of a new world economic order that would enable Africa to fit into globalization and thereby find its way out of poverty. We still have a glimmer of hope because we believe there is no genuine solution other than the regulation of the global economy based on the necessary solidarity with the most disadvantaged countries.

We have however understood that at best, this will take time. Meanwhile, Africa is determined to forge ahead. It hopes that besides its own resources and those of the new economic players, it can continue to count on the assistance of the partners that have supported it since independence.

Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

After this long digression, let me come to what gathers us today.

I believe that the commemoration of the independence of African countries affords a great opportunity to attempt an answer to the issue raised in the central theme of this conference: "Africa, an Opportunity for the World: Realities and Challenges".

After having been described for a long time as the continent of poverty and inertia, Africa is now acknowledged as having certain potentials. The issue is not why this change of opinion. Suffice it to say that Africa is undoubtedly endowed with mineral resources, energy and agricultural potential and that its population which is presently a liability could become an asset in the long term. Of course, the problem is how to leverage such assets.

One of the obstacles our continent has often faced - and still faces – in developing its resources is financing. That remains one of the most challenging obstacles. The issue, it seems, is not so much the lack of financing opportunities as the viability of projects and guarantees to investors. It will be interesting to examine the possibilities of finding practical solutions to this problem within through mutually beneficial partnerships.

It is obvious that in this and other domains, our chances of development are closely linked to all aspects of good governance. The mismanagement of public funds, judicial insecurity, administrative bottlenecks, let alone customs fraud and corruption, which are commonplace in Africa, should be checked systematically. Although most often, they are clearly identified, they are very difficult to eradicate as they are deeply rooted in our behaviour. We must know that as long as we fail to eliminate them, the outcome of our recovery efforts will remain uncertain.

Furthermore, since the rise of terrorism, the emergence of piracy and development of organized banditry, insecurity in our continent has taken a different face. A more insidious and unpredictable instability has replaced “civil wars” that pitted political factions against each other or rebels against governments in power, which fortunately, are less frequent today. Yet, we are aware that any form of disorder and democracy and development are not bedfellows. If we want to preserve the latter, it is in our best interest as Africans to seek arrangements whereby we can combat these deadly phenomena, through concerted action at regional and continental levels rather than in dispersed ranks.

Also, no one challenges the fact that Africa is not well represented in circles where decisions affecting the whole world are taken. Such is the case notably in the United Nations, especially at the Security Council which African countries can join only as non-permanent members. Although the issue of the reform of the Council has been longstanding, it is yet to be resolved. It would be fair for Africa to have at least one seat based on a method of representation to be determined by Africans. Furthermore, while we are pleased that South Africa is now a member of the G20, would it not be normal that a developing country of Africa should accompany it?

The same could also apply to other domains where Africa has often felt that it is still under trusteeship. This to me seems unacceptable to

Africans who are somewhat frustrated by it, but should also be to rest of the world which seems to ignore our aspirations and potentials. After all, at fifty, we are mature!

Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Such are some themes, among others, that you may explore during your deliberations. I cannot thank you enough for accepting to take part in this collective reflection exercise. I sincerely believe that the exercise is worth the trouble.

Indeed, I am convinced that your discussions could contribute to the development of a comprehensive programme for the integration of Africa in world affairs. As the land that has been soaked in blood and tears” over several centuries, it is morally entitled to that. Endowed with natural resources and the vitality of its peoples, it has a role to play.

Thank you for your kind attention.