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Barack Obama's three misdeeds in Africa

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CADTM

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After the G8 summit in Italy, US President Barack Obama flew off to Africa with a so-called gift: an envelope of 20 billion dollars to distribute over 3 years, so that “generous” donors in the rich countries could “help” reduce world hunger. While the promise to eradicate hunger has been made on a regular basis since 1970, the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) published a report last month indicating that the number of undernourished people has passed the one billion point, that is 100 million more over the past year. At the same time, the United Nations World Food Programme (WFP) sounded the alarm bell and announced that it had to cut rations distributed in Rwanda, Uganda, Ethiopia, North Korea and Kenya (Obama's paternal family's home country), principally due to the reduction in contributions from the US, its main donor [2.](#)

Beyond the effect of President Obama's announcement, the latest in a long list of good intentions that have done nothing to improve the current situation, it is worth recalling that the 20 billion dollar aid figure over 3 years amounts to less than 2% of the sums the US spent in 2008-2009 to save the bankers and insurers responsible for the crisis.

After extending a hand to the “Muslim friends” in his Cairo speech (while continuing to destabilise the Middle East region behind the scenes), after a hand held out to the “Russian friends” (while maintaining his stance on the Eastern European anti-missile shield), now Obama is extending a hand to the “African friends” (while keeping his neocolonial cap firmly atop his head).

When Obama lets the rich countries off the hook

Obama's long address in Accra, Ghana, follows up on a series of meetings with his counterparts abroad. Under the pretext of setting new bases for US relations with the rest of the world, once again Obama has excelled in the art of advocating openness and change, while continuing to implement his forerunners' disastrous policies [3.](#)

From the outset, he stated that it was “up to Africans to determine Africa's future”. And yet, while everyone can agree with this statement that makes perfect sense on the face of it, in reality this is not always put into practice, and the G8 countries over the past half-century have played a key role in depriving African peoples of their sovereignty. Obama doesn't fail to remind us “I have the blood of Africa within me”, as if this automatically provided more strength and legitimacy to his message. In any case the message was clearly conveyed: the colonialism their ancestors were victims of should no longer provide excuses for Africans. This is very similar to the speech French President Nicolas Sarkozy pronounced in Dakar a few months after his election. But Sarkozy's speech sparked a wave of well-deserved protest, and so far Obama has miraculously averted such a response... But now we will do what it takes to end this injustice!

Straight off, Obama let the Western world off the hook for the current state of the African continent's development. Declaring, “development depends upon good governance” and “that is a responsibility that can only be met by Africans” [4.](#), he starts out from the false observation that the poverty plaguing Africa is primarily due to poor governance or the free choices of African leaders. In short, it is Africans' fault. Nothing could be farther from the truth!

With affirmations such as “the West is not responsible for the destruction of the Zimbabwean economy over the last decade, or wars in which children are enlisted as combatants” [5.](#), President Obama is downplaying the rich countries' central role in the course Africa has taken. And in particular the role of the major international financial

institutions, starting from IMF and the World Bank, which are powerful instruments of the great powers' domination organizing the subjection of the peoples of the South. This is done via structural adjustment policies (end to subsidies for staple goods, drastic cuts in public spending, privatisation of public companies, market liberalization, etc.) that make it impossible to meet basic needs, spread deep poverty at breakneck speed, increase inequalities and make the worst horrors possible.

When Obama compares incomparable situations

To back up his statements, Obama compared Africa to South Korea. Firstly, he explained that fifty years ago, "when my father travelled to the United States from Kenya to study, at that time the per capita income and Gross Domestic Product of Kenya was higher than South Korea's", before he added: "There had been some talk about the legacies of colonialism and other policies by wealthier nations, and without in any way diminishing that history, the point I made was that the South Korean government, working with the private sector and civil society, was able to create a set of institutions that provided transparency and accountability [\[6.\]](#). Regular and attentive readers of CADTM publications choked on that one!

This is because South Korea's supposed economic success [\[7.\]](#) came about despite the recommendations imposed by the World Bank on most other developing countries. After the Second World War and up until 1961, the military dictatorship in power in South Korea benefited from significant donations from the United States, totalling the sum of 3.1 billion dollars. This is more than all World Bank loans to the other Third-World countries during the same period! Thanks to these donations, South Korea did not have to go into debt for 17 years (1945-1961). External borrowing only became significant from the end of the 1970s, once Korea's industrialisation was well under way.

So everything started out in Korea through an iron-fisted dictatorship that implemented a statist and highly protectionist policy. Washington set up this dictatorship in the wake of the Second World War. The State imposed a radical agrarian reform under which big Japanese landowners were expropriated without compensation. The peasants took on ownership of small plots of land (equivalent to up to 3 hectares per family) and the State expropriated the surplus crops, formerly pocketed by Japanese landowners when Korea was a Nippon colony. The land reform set stringent restrictions on the peasantry. The State set prices and production quotas, not allowing for the free play of market forces.

From 1961 to 1979, the World Bank backed Park Chung Hee's military dictatorship although Korea refused to follow the Bank's development model. At the time, the state was planning the country's economic development with an iron fist. Continuing to implement a policy of industrialisation by substitution for imports and the overexploitation of the working class were two ingredients in the country's economic success. The World Bank did back Chun Doo Whan's dictatorship (1980-1987) although the Bank's recommendations were not always followed (particularly in terms of restructuring the automotive sector).

It is also important to refresh Barack Obama's memory as he refers to the Zimbabwean example to illustrate Africans' failure and comparing it to the South Korean model. The year Zimbabwe achieved independence (1980) was marked by popular uprisings against the South Korean military dictatorship. These were crushed in blood; more than 500 civilians were killed by the military with Washington's backing [\[9.\]](#). At this time, and since 1945, the South Korean armed forces were put under a joint US-Korean command, itself under the control of the commander-in-chief of United States forces in South Korea. The massacres perpetrated by the South Korean army in May 1980 were

completed by a massive repression in the following months. According to an official report dated 9 February 1981, over 57,000 people were arrested during the "Social Purification Campaign" underway since the summer of 1980. Almost 39,000 of these people were sent to military camps for "physical and psychological re-education". In February 1981, the dictator Chun Doo Hwan was received at the White House by the new United States President, Ronald Reagan. Is this the example Obama wants to offer to the people of Zimbabwe and other African countries?

Korea's geostrategic position was one of its major assets until the end of the 1980s, enabling it to avert IMF and World Bank control. But in the 1990s, the entire geopolitical situation was in disarray following the collapse of the Soviet bloc. Washington's attitude towards allied dictatorships shifted gradually, accepting to support civil governments. Between 1945 and 1992, South Korea lived under a military regime with Washington's blessing. The first civil opponent elected to the presidency in an open election was Kim Youngsam, who accepted the Washington Consensus and implemented a clearly neoliberal agenda (elimination of tariff barriers, multiple privatisations, liberalization of capital movements), plunging South Korea into the 1997-1998 South-East Asian economic crisis. In the meantime, South Korea was able to achieve an industrialisation the rich countries refused in Africa's case. We can thereby understand to what extent the South Korean model is unconvincing and can't be reproduced everywhere.

Moreover, South Korea's relative lack of natural resources paradoxically favoured its development because the country avoided transnational corporations' resource lust. The United States viewed Korea as a strategic zone from a military standpoint, facing the USSR bloc, not as crucial sources of supplies (as were Nigeria, Angola and Congo-Kinshasa). If Korea had major reserves of oil or other strategic raw materials, Washington would not have allowed it the same elbowroom to develop a powerful industrial complex. The United States are not prepared to deliberately foster the emergence of powerful competitors with both major natural reserves and diversified industries.

When Obama pardons capitalism for its misdeeds

As for the current economic crisis, Obama spoke out against the irresponsible risk-taking of a few, sparking a recession that has swept the world. Thus, he conveys the impression that this crisis was caused by the irresponsibility of a handful of individuals whose excesses plunged the world into recession. This analysis eclipses the responsibility of those who have imposed financial deregulation for almost thirty years, above all the United States. It would be more precise to underline the productivist capitalist development model, painfully imposed by the countries of the North, as the source of the many crises underway. These are not merely economic crises, but also food, migratory, social, environmental and climate crises.

All these crises originate with decisions made by imperialist governments in the North, and above all the United States government which controls both the IMF and World Bank, so it can impose conditionalities favourable to its interests and those of its major firms. Since the early 1960s, when most African countries achieved "independence", IMF and the World Bank have been a kind of Trojan horse to promote the appropriation of natural resources and defend creditors' interests. By supporting dictatorships in many corners of the world, (Mobutu in Zaire, Suharto in Indonesia, Pinochet in Chile and so many others), then by forcing the implementation of harsh antisocial policies, successive Western governments have never allowed for the guarantee of basic human rights throughout the world. Expressions such as "right to self-determination", "democracy", "economic and political rights" are not realities in Africa, contrary to the crushing weight of debt repayments and the pleas of the starving.

When will African emancipation come?

Africa was broken by the devastating slave trade system in the context of the triangular international trade established by Europe and its settlers in the Americas from the 17th to the 19th centuries. Then it was held in trusteeship by European colonialism from the end of the 19th century until independence. Thereafter, Africa has been

held in dependency through the mechanism of the debt and public development aid. After African countries achieved independence, they were handed over to potentates (Mobutu, Bongo, Eyadema, Amin Dada, Bokassa, Biya...) most of whom were protected by the European capitals and by Washington. Several important African leaders who sought autonomous development that would promote their peoples were assassinated on the orders of Paris, Brussels, London or Washington (Patrice Lumumba in 1961, Sylvanus Olympio in 1963, Thomas Sankara in 1987...). The African ruling classes and the political regimes they established have a very clear share in the responsibility for Africa's litany of misfortunes. Robert Mugabe's regime in Zimbabwe is one of these. Today, the peoples of Africa are directly affected by the effects of the world crisis whose epicentre is in Washington and Wall Street, revealing that capitalism is up against an impasse unacceptable for peoples. Barack Obama's African origins are a godsend for businesses in his country defending very specific economic interests in the exploitation of Africa's resources. This is a reality that Obama sweeps away with the back of his hand, as he continues a paternalistic and moralising path in order to convince Africans not to undertake the struggle for meaningful independence and real development, finally guaranteeing the full satisfaction of human needs.

Post-scriptum :

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Translated by Maria Gatti.

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[2.] See the Financial Times (FT) 12 June 2009. According to FT, Burham Philbrook, the US Undersecretary of State for Agriculture declared that Washington could not guarantee funding of WFP at the level of 2008, during which the United States had brought 2 billion dollars to the WFP budget. Also according to FT, Philbrook suggested that WFP had to reduce its aid although he knew perfectly well that the number of hungry people increased in 2009.

[3.] This continuity is also visible in Obama's failure to take action in the putsch in Honduras. While denouncing it, he lets matters slide. Furthermore, the Pentagon is very close to the putschists. The latter would not remain in power if the Pentagon gave them the order to withdraw.

[4.] <http://www.reuters.com/article/topN...>

[5.] <http://www.ghanaweb.com/GhanaHomePa...>

[6.] From Obama's statement at the G8 Summit in L'Aquila.

[7.] See Eric Toussaint, World Bank : A Critical Primer, Pluto-Between the Lines-David Philip, London-Toronto-Cape Town, 2007, chapter 11, "South Korea: the miracle unmasked". online: <http://www.cadtm.org/spip.php?article1847>

[9.] http://seoul.usembassy.gov/pres_071...