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## blackworld



### Historic EU-Africa Summit

Photo: Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi, flanked by Central African Republic President Ange Felix Patasse, left, and Togo's President Gnassingbe Eyadema, at Cairo's EU-Africa summit. Courtesy: AP/Wide World Photos.

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The first-ever summit between Africa and the European Union, held April 3-4 in Cairo, Egypt, aimed at establishing "a new strategic partnership" between the regions. Despite a full agenda focusing on poverty, political instability, and foreign debt, the summit was at times distracted by such conflicts as the political row between Britain and Zimbabwe and the controversy surrounding African attempts to retrieve artifacts taken during the colonial era.

Despite the lack of accords on debt relief, market access, or "cultural property," the summit was praised for providing a forum and setting an institutional precedent for dialogue. And individual European nations did make debt concessions, with France canceling the whole of the bilateral debt owed it by the poorest African states, and Germany promising to write off \$350 million in debt owed by nearly 30 countries over the next three years.

"Through this historic event," said Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak in his opening remarks, "we do look forward not to secure more aid, but rather to develop our mutual partnership and [a] cooperation program." Speaking to the 15 European delegates and 52 African leaders in attendance (Somalia was not invited because it does not have a "recognized government"), Mubarak was quick to raise the issue of debt relief, the African nations' chief concern at the summit, lamenting the "unfavorable external conditions" and a "tangible drop" in foreign investment.

"Africa is sagging beneath the debt burden which weighs so heavily as to rule out any possibility of improving the situation," said Algerian President Abdelaziz Bouteflika, adding that the continent is "consumed by hunger,

disease, and ignorance" and "is aware of its shortfalls in the rule of law, but does not want to be judged summarily without its particular circumstances taken into account." Bouteflika concluded, however, that "Europe and Africa can work together in their mutual interest with both profiting from the African continent's vast resources."

Prime Minister Antonio Guterres of Portugal, whose country currently holds the EU presidency, said the Europeans shared "the concern of African leaders for the burden of external debt, for open market access to their products, for investment and technological flows, for international aid to development," adding "Africa must not be marginalized in the economic and technological revolution that we are all undergoing."

While African leaders focused on debt relief and access to European markets, their European counterparts talked of corruption, arms and drug trafficking, and illegal immigration, and repeatedly stressed the importance of "good governance" and democracy for development. "The development of each country lies firstly on its own responsibility," said Guterres. "And it will always be easier and better respecting democracy and the principles of good governance."

"Give us the keys to the gates of freedom in economic relations," responded Ghanaian President Jerry Rawlings, "don't just tell us about good governance." And Nigeria's president Olusegun Obasanjo said, "We do not ask for charity. We seek debt relief and remission. We seek mutually beneficial investment. We seek fairer terms of international trade. We insist that Africa is not perpetually relegated to being a dumping ground for sub-standard goods coming from Europe or anywhere else."

Noting that 50 percent of all Africans live in "absolute poverty," the summit's final declaration reads: "We commit ourselves to the globally agreed target of poverty reduction by half by the year 2015." Leaders on both sides agreed to remove trade barriers, including non-tariff barriers, and this year the EU pledged to provide duty-free markets for products from "least-developed nations" by 2005. But debt remained a polarizing issue, with the Austrian foreign minister declaring that "to go ahead with complete debt alleviation would go very far beyond our own means," while OAU Secretary-General Salim Ahmed Salim asked for a "faster, deeper, and broader process of debt relief."

"The moral question underwriting the forgiveness issue is improperly configured," says Steven Borke, a researcher at Columbia University who specializes in international politics. "It's misguided to think the EU should forgive former colonies' their foreign debt." The real question, Borke says, is "when are the Africans going to forgive the Europeans, and how will Africans calculate that economic debt."

In another contentious topic, African leaders also pressed for the return of cultural possessions taken from their places of origin, including the Rosetta Stone, the Sphinx's beard, and various mummies to Egypt, an obelisk to Ethiopia, and a golden throne to Ghana. "We want to see a mechanism like the one that secured the return of Nazi gold held in Swiss banks," said one African delegate. "There were dozens of pieces of art removed from Africa during the colonial period, like the golden Ashanti throne which was taken from Ghana to London."

Some progress has already occurred. In 1999, Italy returned a second-century statue of Venus that had been taken by Libya's Italian colonial ruler and presented as a gift to Nazi commander Hermann Goering. But, while

the summit's final declaration said it had "taken note of the concerns of the African states" and pledged to "examine the legal and practical consequences of further action in this area," it was reported that the British Foreign Minister openly quipped to another summit delegate in the lobby of the Sheraton Hotel that "the major achievement for Britain is that we go through three days without handing back the Rosetta Stone."

The long-simmering row between Britain and Zimbabwe threatened to cast a pall over the historic summit. British Foreign Secretary Robin Cook expressed outrage at recent violence against anti-government demonstrators in the Zimbabwean capital, while one of Cook's junior ministers called the violence in Harare "thuggery orchestrated from on high." Zimbabwean leader Robert Mugabe countered by calling British Prime Minister Tony Blair "a piddling posturing pygmy." Cook also denounced the current occupation and confiscation of white farmland by Zimbabwean squatters, saying that Britain will renege on its promise to finance Zimbabwe's land reform program if the illegal occupations do not end. Cook also pushed for elections and offered to send EU election monitors "to make sure not only that those elections are free and fair, but are seen to be free and fair." Responding to Mugabe's objection to such intervention as evidence of Britain treating Zimbabwe as a colony, Cook said "We would be colonial to the people of Zimbabwe if we were to expect them to have less civil rights, less political rights, less rights to a democratic election than we expect for ourselves."

It was, however, Muammar Gaddafi, Libya's flamboyant leader, who provided the summit's most entertaining sideshow. While other African leaders stayed in Cairo's posh hotels, Gaddafi pitched a massive tent outside Egypt's Palace of Peace, a presidential guesthouse. (At an OAU conference in July 1999, where Libya was officially reinstated, the Libyan leader pitched his tent outside the Sheraton Hotel, where the conference took place, scorning the hotel as "a symbol of American imperialism.")

European leaders, expecting a conciliatory speech from the Libyan strongman, were taken aback by Gaddafi's fiery address, which excoriated both Europe and the U.S., singling out France's Jacques Chirac and Portugal's Guterres. Clad in orange robes and dark glasses, Colonel Gaddafi said he found it hard to believe the two leaders were genuinely concerned about Africa's plight, given their countries' colonial records. "Africa is not a ping-pong ball to be hit once by Europe, once by the US. I have doubts that Europe can stand up to its own responsibilities...Europe is submerged by American imperialism," railed the Libyan leader, who went on to subjects seemingly far afield. "We do not love conflicts. You love conflicts. You have bullfights...Capitalists have changed eggs and honey into shampoo. You use cocoa fat as cream for your hair? This is misuse of God's blessings."

The President of the European Commission, Romani Prodi, said he was "strongly disappointed" by the speech, calling it a "missed chance" and saying, "these are not words that will help dialogue between Europe and Libya." But European leaders, eager to re-establish business ties with the oil-rich North African nation, met with Gaddafi in his tent, where the Libyan leader sat surrounded by his legendary female bodyguards, who were wearing red berets and green fatigues. Gaddafi told the Arab News Network that Libya "would favorably welcome renewed relations with America," and in meetings with African leaders, he lobbied for his new cause, "a United States of Africa."

Algerian leader Bouteflika told reporters in a closing session, "You should not expect miracles...[or] spectacular leaps," adding that not since the

1960s had there been such "deep discussions" between the two continents, and that "follow-up mechanisms" had been put in place to insure the implementation of promises. Guterres likewise said the summit was never intended to "heal the wounds" left by imperialism, but to chart a common path for the future, adding that there was "the political will" to do that. "After this summit, Europeans will never be the same; the summit marked a 'turning point' because Europeans know now they have to help Africa emerge from poverty and the legacy of colonialism," he said.

The next EU-Africa summit is provisionally scheduled to be held in 2003 in Athens, Greece.

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