

NYM/208/0004/14

19.10.93



INTER PRESS SERVICE

DAILY JOURNAL

VOL. 1 NO. 164

TUESDAY, 19 OCTOBER 1993

NORTH-SOUTH BATTLE OVER HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSIONER

by Thalif Deen

UNITED NATIONS, Oct 18 (IPS) - A North-South battle is looming at the United Nations over a proposal to create a post of High Commissioner for Human Rights. Western countries, including the United States and the 12 members of the European Community (EC), want to first establish the post and then spell out the powers of the new Commissioner. But Third World nations say the Commissioner's mandate should be approved before the post itself is created.

It's the same old argument about the cart and the horse, the Chinese delegate told a closed door meeting, "How can you put the cart before the horse?" he asked. "But the High Commissioner is the horse," the U.S. delegate shot back.

Barbadian Foreign Minister Branford Taitt told the General Assembly last week that the mandate of the High Commissioner "should be satisfactorily defined", and that the office "should not be manipulated to achieve the political ends of any state." Taitt said that at the same time, there should be adequate safeguards in the mandate to ensure the Commissioner's independence and neutrality.

"The High Commissioner should be empowered to investigate alleged human rights abuses across all borders -- and not only on a selective basis," he said. The proposal for a High Commissioner for

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Arias & Egeland keynote speakers at award ceremony

IPS HONOURS BOSNIAN DAILY, NORWEGIAN INSTITUTE

UNITED NATIONS, Oct 18 (IPS)-- Nobel Peace laureate Oscar Arias and Norway's deputy foreign minister Jan Egeland will be guest speakers at the 1993 Inter Press Service (IPS) International Achievement Award ceremony.

Egeland and Arias, the former president of Costa Rica and 1987 Nobel Peace Prize winner, will speak at an Oct. 27 ceremony at U.N. headquarters which will honour Bosnia's daily, Oslobodjenje, and Norway's Institute of Applied Social Science (FAFO). FAFO and Egeland, who is state secretary of Norway and deputy to Norwegian Foreign Minister Johan Jorgen Holst, were key players in the negotiations that led to the Israeli-Palestinian peace plan signed in Washington in September.

FAFO helped Norway host 14 secret meetings between the Israeli and Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) negotiators in country estates and Oslo hotels. IPS news agency is honouring FAFO and Oslobodjenje for their commitment to fostering multi-ethnic and multi-religious understanding.

Oslobodjenje's 70 editors and reporters have risked death and injury to report on the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina. The multi-ethnic paper, which celebrated its 50th anniversary Aug. 30, has appeared every day during the war, despite the razing of the main office building in Sarajevo.

Oslobodjenje is to be represented at the ceremony by Editor-in-Chief Kemal Kurspahic and FAFO, by its director Terje Rod Larsen. In addition to Arias and Egeland, speakers at next week's ceremony will include Marco Vianello-Chiodo, Assistant Secretary-General in charge of the Department of Public Information. Under-Secretary-General Gillian Sorensen will speak on behalf of Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali.

IPS has honoured journalists and human rights activists who have made significant contributions in their fields since 1985. Past winners include Danielle Mitterrand, French first lady and President of the Paris-based human rights body Frances-Libertes, and Haitian President Jean-Bertrand Aristide.

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JAPAN'S INTEREST IN AFRICA MARKS MAJOR FOREIGN POLICY SHIFT

by Suvendrini Kakuchi

TOKYO, Oct 18 (IPS) - Japan's increased interest in Africa reflects the economic superpower's desire to expand its role in the international community, political analysts here say. Tokyo recently hosted an international conference on African development, which Prime Minister Morihiro Hosokawa said was proof of their commitment to refocus world attention on Africa.

"We must not allow the needs of Africa to be ignored in any way because of developments in other areas of the world," he told the gathering of African nations and donor countries. A declaration issued at the end of the meeting confirmed Tokyo's commitment to support economic and political reforms in Africa, and called for the adoption of the Asian model of economic success for Africa's future development.

The Japanese government's decision to pay greater attention to Africa marks a major departure from its past foreign policy which concentrated on its Asian neighbours. "Japan's interests lay predominantly in Asia in the past few years. But as its diplomatic clout grows with its position as the world's richest nation, the picture is slowly changing," says Africa expert Ichiro Inukai, a professor at the International University of Japan.

Japan's entry into Africa, despite the looming pitfalls, could turn out to be a viable new step for the nation. "It's a rocky road but Japan is playing the right cards," says Inukai. "As a first step, its approach of promoting an Asian model for Africa has struck the right chord."

Africa's enthusiastic response at the recent Tokyo conference showed the Africans are eagerly snatching the opportunity to forge closer ties with the economic superpower. Isaac Aluko-Olokin, who headed the Nigerian delegation, said Africa had been "tied to the apron strings of the West for too long". He said the economic success of East and South-east Asia was a refreshing change and could serve as a model for Africa.

A Ghanaian Foreign Ministry official put it more bluntly, saying the Africans were tired of being dictated to by the West. "Westerners have robbed us of our dignity by taking away our land, precious resources and even our people. We welcome Japan as a fresh alternative," said the official who requested anonymity.

Reacting to comments linking Japan's new Africa policy to its bid to gain a permanent seat at the U.N. Security Council, the Ghanaian official said: "Nobody gives something for nothing. If Japan extends help

to us and wants Africa's support in return, we are more than willing to give it." Besides an increase in Japanese aid, African nations expect large doses of private investment to help them produce high-quality goods for export -- the same assistance that contributed to the rapid growth of East and South-east Asian economies.

Economist Katsuya Mochizuki says Tokyo is for the first time even considering taking the unprecedented step of writing off some of the debts of the poorest African states. Encouraging private investment, however, is likely to prove more difficult.

Trade between Japan and Africa has not improved much over the past decade. Japanese exports to Africa reached 5.13 billion dollars in 1992, an 18 percent increase from the previous year's figure, while imports from Africa dropped by three percent.

Mochizuki attributes these developments to the political uncertainty in many African states and the economic recession in Japan. A spokesman for Keidanren, Japan's largest business organisation, explained that Japan could buy most of what Africa offers -- crude oil, coal and iron ore -- from Asia. "Thus the common reaction was, 'Why go all the way to Africa?'" he said.

But Mochizuki says Africa still holds considerable potential for Japan. "I don't see a big difference between the situation in Africa and that in Asia when it embarked on its economic reconstruction. African leaders can woo Japanese businessmen by providing stable governments and an attractive investment climate. It's tough going but I believe it can work," says Mochizuki.

Africans themselves seem aware of the need to treat their newfound friendship with Japan with caution. "Africa is not Asia," said a Nigerian delegate to the Tokyo meeting. "We are not talking of accepting a reprint of the East Asian economic miracle in Africa. What we are saying is we are willing to give Japan a chance." ■

U.N. CHIEF URGES RICH TO UP AID TO 1.1 BILLION POOR

by Jaya Dayal

UNITED NATIONS, Oct 18 (IPS) - The U.N. Secretary-General Monday appealed to rich countries for stronger support and increased levels of assistance to the world's 1.1 billion poor. Boutros Boutros-Ghali's appeal comes just days after ministers from the world's 47 least developed countries (LDCs), described as the poorest of the poor, accused their rich development partners of falling short on their commitments.

The 47 countries, of which nearly 30 are in Africa, have a combined population of over half-a-

billion people and a per capita gross domestic product (GDP) of 600 dollars or less. A declaration by LDC ministers here late last month noted "with serious concern that while LDCs were implementing wide-ranging policy reforms, the majority of their development partners had fallen short of their own commitments."

The declaration says the Organisation of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries have reduced their aid performance from 0.09 percent in 1989 and 1990 to 0.08 percent in 1991. The LDC ministers say that donor nations have cut back their share in OECD aid programmes.

Boutros-Ghali said Monday that while there has been significant progress in some places, most notably in eastern Asia, poverty had advanced in other parts of the developing world. He said that poverty now engulfs one-fifth of the world's population and is the cause of five million child deaths per year, one billion illiterates, and roughly 800 million people who lack adequate food.

"I cannot over-emphasise the importance of devoting additional resources in the struggle against poverty," Boutros-Ghali said on the U.N.-proclaimed international day for poverty eradication. He said that increasing economic disparity and social decline fueled political tensions, and he warned that "if poverty is allowed to increase, so will international conflicts in the years to come."

Boutros-Ghali called on the private sector and non-governmental organisations to join in programmes to combat poverty, noting that "the burden of poverty is a burden that one way or another falls on the entire world." But the gap between the industrialised countries of the North and the developing countries of the South is widening as the promised partnership for development fails to take hold, say LDC ministers.

LDC ministers urged donors in their declaration last month to safeguard aid allocations to their countries and to provide "substantially increased" external financial resources in line with the U.N.-adopted programme of action for LDCs in the 1990s. The declaration reiterated the need for a significant increase in real terms in the overall resources available for U.N. development activities, and in the need for priority allocation of grant resources to programmes and projects in the LDCs.

LDCs have borne the brunt of shrinking voluntary contributions by industrialised countries to the U.N. development agencies like the U.N. Development Programme (UNDP), the U.N. Population Fund (UNFPA) and the U.N. Children's Fund (UNICEF). The ministers also cited their roughly 100-billion-dollar debt -- compared to the overall Third World debt of about 1.4 trillion dollars -- and their debt service burden as "a major obstacle to development efforts."

LDC debt currently represents three-quarters of their combined gross national product (GNP)

while debt-servicing claims one-fifth of all exports. The ministers called for the cancellation of all bilateral official debt and the implementation of urgent and effective measures for substantial reduction of their debt stock and debt service owed to multilateral financial institutions and commercial creditors.

The ministers also said that "LDC's position in world trade had become further marginalised as they suffered a decline in the current value of their total exports and their market share." They urged participants in the Uruguay Round of multilateral trade negotiations to expand their trading opportunities through unrestricted access to markets -- free of all tariff and non-tariff barriers. ■

THE GOOD AND THE BAD OF AGRO-BIOTECHNOLOGY

BRUSSELS, Oct 16 (IPS) - Putting science to work, like in the creation 'super' plants and animals may be one way of producing enough food for the world's growing population -- projected to reach 7.2 billion by the year 2010. But for developing countries which generate 90 percent of this population increase -- estimated at 95 million people annually -- the fast developing 'agro-biotechnology' sector also raises concern about the likely negative impact on Third World economies.

These hopes and concerns were raised Saturday by participants attending a symposium on 'Agro-biotechnology for food security -- solutions for a global village', organised by Belgium's Development Minister, Eric Derycke, to mark World Food Day. "For developing countries, bio-technology can contribute greatly to the solution of a number of problems like sustainable production, health care and protection of the environment," said Derycke.

But he added: "As with all technological developments, biotechnology has positive as well as negative consequences for developing countries. Substitution of primary commodities, industrialisation of agriculture and privatisation of knowledge and technology are examples of the latter." Many scientific processes fall under the 'agro-biotech' umbrella -- from the cloning of existing gene types, selective breeding, production of vaccines for animals, and chemical additives to improve crop yield or breed meatier animals.

It gives rise to hopes of tripling crop yields, super-plants producing their own fertilisers and pesticides developed and cows with higher milk yields. Professor Louise van Vloten-Doting, Director of Agriculture at the Agricultural Research Department, the Netherlands, cited current research to create detection kits based on DNA to probe for

(continued on page 4)

diseases and parasites in both plants and animals.

In the near future, this easy-to-use, do-it-yourself type kit, might be available to farms in the Third World. She said: "Early detection of infections will contribute to sustainable agriculture and food security because it will lead to a substantial reduction in the use of pesticides."

But, she added: "At the moment it is difficult to predict whether the price of such kits will be suitable or prohibitive for use in the developing world." This flip-side of agro-bio tech runs the gamut of research. Dr. Henk Hobbelink, of the Barcelona-based Genetic Resource Action International -- 'GRAIN' -- a non-governmental organisation (NGO) monitoring the sector, is one of the most critical of the current 'state-of-the-art'.

"Perhaps the most salient feature of the new bio-technologies is perhaps that they are predominantly being developed in the North," said Hobbelink. He quoted a report done for the World Bank in 1985 calculating that only 7.5 percent of worldwide bio-tech research is done outside the United States, the 12-member European Community and Japan. Outside of that group, the research is mainly conducted in Canada and Australia.

What is more, the bulk of the research is being

carried out by large multi-national corporations. According to the Rome-Based 'Food and Agriculture Organisation' (FAO), the five largest plant biotechnology companies are all large multi-national corporations with interests in agro-chemical sales. They are Dupont, ICI, Monsanto, Sandoz and Ciba-Geigy. The bulk of on-going field work of such companies is geared to creating crops which are more tolerant to herbicides. This lucrative research comes before that into resistance to the pests and insects themselves.

Hobbelink said: "The logic seems obvious: herbicide resistant crops would increase the sales of the herbicides from the same or other companies. The logic for small third world farmers and food security is less obvious: more chemicals mean higher costs, more damage to the environment and a higher risk to food security." Another minefield is that research is being concentrated on a narrow band of genetic material. Such uniformity could seriously undermine the objective of developing more sustainable agriculture.

Hobbelink is also worried about the effects on Third World economies of substitution of crops like sugar, cocoa, bananas and vegetable oils, and says no crop is safe from the bio-race. ■

NORTH-SOUTH BATTLE OVER HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSIONER

(continued from front cover)

Human Rights was one of the most contentious issues at the World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna in June. After failing to reach agreement, the Conference shifted the responsibility to the 184-member General Assembly.

The Conference recommended that the General Assembly, "as a matter of priority", consider "the question of the establishment of a High Commissioner for Human Rights for the promotion and protection of all human rights." One Third World delegate told IPS that the Vienna Conference only asked the Assembly to consider "the question of the establishment of a High Commissioner" -- not the establishment of the Commissioner itself.

Redzuan Kushairi, chairman of the Non-Aligned Working Group on Human Rights is concerned about the neutrality of the High Commissioner. He told IPS prior to the Vienna Conference that he feared the whole thing could be just another political exercise to humiliate Third World nations.

"Is this High Commissioner also going to investigate human rights abuses in the United States? Are we going to allow him to probe rights violations in Brooklyn, the Bronx, Harlem and Los Angeles?" he asked. Kushairi was making an implicit reference to charges of police brutality, discrimination and rights violations in U.S. cities and boroughs dominated by African-Americans and Hispanics.

At a meeting of the 110-member Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) last week, several Third World delegates said they feared the West could be planning to rush through the proposal without open discussion. Some Western countries have said they want the proposal to be discussed at closed-door meetings by a small working group, and if necessary, to take decisions by vote.

But NAM members insist that the proposal should be discussed at open-ended meetings of all 184 member-states with written records of the discussions. They say decisions should be taken by consensus because trying to vote a High Commissioner into office would be counter-productive.

NAM also agreed that the High Commissioner for Human Rights should be just one of several issues -- not the sole issue -- that should be discussed as a follow-up to the Vienna Conference. The North and the South also disagree on whether the High Commissioner should report to the Security Council or to the General Assembly. The North favours the Security Council and the South the General Assembly.

Writing in the New York Times last month, former U.S. President Jimmy Carter favoured the General Assembly route: the Commissioner "should be impartial and independent, appointed by the General Assembly, to which he or she would report." "This is an important safeguard to avoid the selectivity and the double standards pervading the work of the Commission (on Human Rights) and the Security Council," Carter said. ■

NEWSBRIEFS...

U.N. LINKS ECONOMIC AID TO HUMAN RIGHTS RECORD

GENEVA, Oct 18 (IPS) - The United Nations will not offer economic cooperation to Equatorial Guinea if it does not improve its human rights record, said a senior U.N. official here Monday.

"In Equatorial Guinea there are no political rights, freedom of the press does not exist and the condition of prisoners of conscience is catastrophic," United Nations special envoy, Alejandro Artucio, said on his return from a visit to the country.

The West African coastal state gained its independence from Spain in 1968, and has been ruled since then by a military regime. The present President, General Teodoro Obiang Mba Nzago, head of the Supreme Military Council, took power from his uncle in a 1979 coup and later had him executed for crimes against humanity. Regarding parliamentary elections scheduled for November 21, Artucio said of the 13 non-government parties, ten had already announced that they would be boycotting the poll in protest at Obiang's failure to meet commitments to free and fair voting...

VENEZUELA, MEXICO OPPOSE UNILATERAL INVASION OF HAITI

CARACAS, Oct. 18 (IPS) - In separate statements Monday, Venezuela and Mexico said they opposed any unilateral military invasion of Haiti to oust the country's military regime. In Caracas, Venezuelan foreign minister Fernando Ochoa said he rejected any unilateral U.S. invasion of Haiti, but supported a multi-lateral operation against Haiti's military government, within the framework of the United Nations.

And in Mexico City, the foreign ministry said it supported the U.N.-imposed trade embargo, "but will oppose any eventual unilateral action of any country against Haiti, and, in particular, any armed intervention." Ochoa said that despite persistent news media reports to the contrary, he did not think Washington was at the moment contemplating an invasion of Haiti. Venezuela supported the re-imposition of the trade embargo, he said, as well as the deployment of warships to enforce it....

BRITAIN, FRANCE, U.S. PUSH FOR TIGHTER SANCTIONS ON LIBYA

UNITED NATIONS, Oct 18 (IPS) - Three of the U.N. Security Council's five permanent members Monday declared their intention to pursue tighter sanctions against Libya. The ambassadors of Britain, France and the United States met to find ways of pushing a resolution they had tabled at the Council two weeks ago, calling for an embargo on all Libyan oil-related machinery and a freeze on its overseas assets.

One U.S. source said that Washington was secure it had the necessary votes to pass the resolution, despite recent objections from Arab states and China about moving too hastily. But Council President Ronaldo Sardenberg of Brazil said the body will still await "further developments" before voting.

The vote has been delayed several times as the Council and Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali awaited steps from Libya towards resolving two plane bombings involving British, French and U.S. citizens. But the three permanent members urged stronger action, arguing that the imposition last year of sanctions -- cutting direct air links to Libya and preventing arms commerce with Tripoli -- had seen little effect.

The sanctions supporters quickened the pace in response to a rebuff from lawyers of two suspects sought in the 1988 bombing of a Pan American plane over Lockerbie, Scotland. Last week, lawyers for Abdel Basset al-Megrahi and Lamen Khalifa Fhimah, whom Washington and London both insist should be tried in one of their nations, said that neither man would stand trial either in Britain or the United States.

Tripoli argues that though it would not oppose allowing the suspects to be tried in either country, it would not force their extradition. The government of Col. Muammar Qaddafi tried to push matters by getting lawyers from Scotland to talk to the suspects' defence attorney, but that attempt ended in last week's rebuff.

Washington and London have argued that Qaddafi is stalling, and will never agree to give up the two suspects. Al-Megrahi and Fhimah both belong to the Megrahi clan, as does powerful Libyan junta leader Lieut. Abdelsalam Jaloud -- a factor reportedly slowing Qaddafi's hand on extradition requests....

Published Monday through Friday by Inter Press Service news agency

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