

MWANAWASA'S OPTIMISM IN DANGER FROM IMF/WORLD BANK MEETINGS

"We see the next decade as the hour of our breakthrough." Thus did President Levy Mwanawasa describe Zambia's future in a very positive address on Thursday 15 September before the United Nations Summit of world leaders.

The three-day Summit brought together over 170 heads of States and Governments from around the world, to review the progress on meeting the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) by 2015, commitments to deal with key development issues such as poverty, hunger, education, gender equality and environment.

In an honest acknowledgement that the record so far of Zambia's position on the MDGs was not so bright, the President admitted that the country had not made much progress on the targets. "But we have done enough," he asserted, "to believe that the target is achievable."

He pledged to firmly anchor the new five-year National Development Plan (NDP) on the achievement of the MDGs. Moreover he stated that prudent financial and public expenditure systems were in place and a "zero tolerance on corruption" had been declared,

What particularly encouraged the President for prospects of a "breakthrough" decade was the promise of total debt relief arising from Zambia's reaching of the HIPC completion point last April. This debt relief, plus benefit from agreements on "financing for development" from the rich countries, should mean progress especially in the social sectors of health and education, according to Mr. Mwanawasa.

However a cloud of doubt descended on these encouraging signs just an hour after President Mwanawasa's speech when British Prime Minister Tony Blair gave a press conference in the same United Nations building. Flanked by President Obasonjo of Nigeria, President Barroso of the European Community, and poverty activist and popular singer Bob Geldof, Blair noted that the promised debt relief was still dependent on decisions next week at the annual meetings of the Boards of the IMF and World Bank.

It has developed that the generous pledges of the G-8 at Gleneagles, Scotland in early July – pledges to cancel 100% of the multilateral debt of 18 poor countries including Zambia – are being called into question. The anti-poverty coalition, Global Call to Action (GCAP) has noted that the Gleneagles deal might suffer serious setbacks at the IMF/WB meetings: "A group of EU countries, including Belgium and The Netherlands, are now trying to derail the deal by phasing its implementation which will put at risk immediate funding of cancellation and impose extra conditions on poor countries."

The Zambia media coordinator of GCAP, Henry Malumo, expressed disappointment with this turn of events and its potential damage to Zambia's development hopes. Malumo, who has been participating in the UN sessions during the past two weeks, stated that the hard work of Zambians to get debt relief and the great need to see greater funds available were now in danger of being ignored. This would make the optimism of President Mwanawasa's speech become very weak indeed,

"If I were back in Zambia now," said Malumo, "I would get everyone who has participated in the debt cancellation for poverty eradication campaign to ring the IMF offices on Monday morning in Lusaka – 01 254716 -- and get across a message of strong protest!" According to Malumo, the powers that would deny the agreed-upon debt relief to Zambia must be sharply confronted.

Bob Geldof was not as diplomatic as Tony Blair in conveying his dismay and disgust at the possible derailing of debt relief by the IMF/World Bank and key countries. "Come on guys!" he cried out, in voicing the powerful call that has gone on around the world for a new chance for the poorest peoples of the world.

[600 words]

by Peter Henriot, in New York

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