



# Thomas Sankara: A United Front Against Debt

By Progressive International



Mister President, Heads of Delegations,

At this moment I would like for us to speak about another pressing issue: the issue of debt, the question of the economic situation in Africa. It is an important condition of our survival, as much as peace. And this is why I have deemed it necessary to put several supplementary points on the table for us to discuss.

Burkina Faso would like to first of all talk about our fear. Our fear is that there are ongoing United Nations meetings, similar meetings, but less and less interest in what we are doing.

Mister President, how many African heads of state are present here when they have been duly called to come speak about Africa in Africa?

Mister President, how many heads of state are ready to head off to Paris, London, or Washington when they are called to a meeting there, but cannot come to a meeting here in Addis-Ababa, in Africa?

I know some of them have valid reasons for not coming. This is why I would suggest, Mister President, that we establish a scale of sanctions or penalties for the heads of state who do not

presently respond to the call. Let's make it so that through a set of points for good behavior, those who come regularly - like us, for example - can be supported in some of their efforts. For example: the projects that we submit to the African Development Bank should be multiplied by a coefficient of Africanness. The least African should be penalized. With this, everyone will come to the meetings.

I would like to say to you, Mister President, that the debt issue is a question we cannot hide. You yourself know about something in your country where you have to make courageous decisions, reckless even - decisions that do not seem to be related to your age or gray hair. His Excellency, the President Habib Bourguiba, who could not come but had us deliver an important message given this other example in Africa, when in Tunisia, for political, social, and economic reasons, has also had to make courageous decisions.

But Mister President, are we going to continue to let the heads of state individually seek solutions to the debt issue at the risk of creating social conflicts at home that could put their stability in jeopardy and even the construction of African unity? The examples I have mentioned - and there are others - warrant that the UN summits provide a reassuring response to each of us in regards to the debt issue.

We think that debt has to be seen from the perspective of its origins. Debt's origins come from colonialism's origins. Those who lend us money are those who colonized us. They are the same ones who used to manage our states and economies. These are the colonizers who indebted Africa through their brothers and cousins, who were the lenders. We had no connections with this debt. Therefore we cannot pay for it.

Debt is neo-colonialism, in which colonizers have transformed themselves into "technical assistants." We should rather say "technical assassins." They present us with financing, with financial backers. As if someone's backing could create development. We have been advised to go to these lenders. We have been offered nice financial arrangements. We have been indebted for 50, 60 years and even longer. That means we have been forced to compromise our people for over 50 years.

Under its current form, controlled and dominated by imperialism, debt is a skillfully managed reconquest of Africa, intended to subjugate its growth and development through foreign rules. Thus, each one of us becomes the financial slave, which is to say a true slave, of those who had been treacherous enough to put money in our countries with obligations for us to repay. We are told to repay, but it is not a moral issue. It is not about this so-called honor of repaying or not.

Mister President, we have been listening and applauding Norway's prime minister [Gro Harlem Brundtland] when she spoke right here. She is European but she said that the whole debt cannot be repaid. Debt cannot be repaid, first because if we don't repay, lenders will not die. That is for sure. But if we repay, we are going to die. That is also for sure. Those who led us to indebtedness gambled as if in a casino. As long as they had gains, there was no debate. But now that they suffer losses, they demand repayment. And we talk about crisis. No, Mister President, they played, they lost, that's the rule of the game, and life goes on.

We cannot repay because we don't have any means to do so.

We cannot pay because we are not responsible for this debt.

We cannot repay but the others owe us what the greatest wealth could never repay, that is blood debt. Our blood had flowed. We hear about the Marshall Plan that rebuilt Europe's economy. But we never hear about the African plan which allowed Europe to face Hitlerian hordes when their economies and their stability were at stake. Who saved Europe? Africa. It is rarely mentioned, to

such a point that we cannot be the accomplices of that thankless silence. If others cannot sing our praises, at least we must say that our fathers had been courageous and that our troops had saved Europe and set the world free from Nazism.

Debt is also the result of confrontation. When we are told about economic crisis, nobody says that this crisis has come about suddenly. The crisis had always been there but it got worse each time that popular masses become more and more conscious of their rights against exploiters. We are in a crisis today because the masses refuse that wealth be concentrated in the hands of a few individuals. We are in crisis because some people are saving enormous sums of money in foreign bank accounts that would be enough to develop Africa. We are in a crisis because we are facing this private wealth that we cannot name. The popular masses don't want to live in ghettos and slums. We are in a crisis because everywhere people are refusing to repeat the problems of Soweto and Johannesburg. There is a struggle, and its intensification is worrying to those with financial power. Now we are asked to be accomplices in a balancing – a balancing favoring those with the financial power; a balancing against the popular masses. No! We cannot be accomplices. No! We cannot go with those who suck our people's blood and live on our people's sweat. We cannot follow them in their murderous ways.

Mister President, we hear about clubs – the Rome Club, Paris Club, club whatever. We hear about Group of Five, Group of Seven, Group of Ten, and maybe Group of One Hundred. And what else? It is normal that we too have our own club and our own group. Let's have Addis-Ababa become now the center from which will a new beginning will emerge. An Addis-Ababa Club. It is our duty to create an Addis-Ababa united front against debt. That is the only way to assert that the refusal to repay is not an aggressive move on our part, but a fraternal move to speak the truth. Furthermore, the popular masses of Europe are not opposed to the popular masses of Africa. Those who want to exploit Africa are those who exploit Europe, too. We have a common enemy. So our Addis-Ababa Club will have to explain to each and all that debt shall not be repaid. And by saying that, we are not against morals, dignity and keeping one's word. We think we don't have the same morality as others. The rich and the poor do not have the same morality. The Bible, the Koran cannot serve those who exploit the people and those who are exploited in the same way. It could be used in favor of both sides, there should be two different editions of the Bible and two different editions of the Koran. We cannot accept to be told about dignity. We cannot accept to be told about the merit of those who repay and the mistrust toward those who do not. On the contrary, we must recognize today that it is normal for the wealthiest to be the greatest thieves. When a poor man steals it is merely a theft, a petty crime – it is solely about survival and necessity. The rich are the ones who steal from the treasury, customs duties, and who exploit the people.

Mister President, my proposal does not aim to simply provoke or create a spectacle. I would just like to say what each one of us thinks and wishes. Who here doesn't wish for the debt to be canceled outright? Whoever doesn't, can leave, get into his plane and go straight to the World Bank to pay! All of us wish for this...my proposal is nothing more. I would not want people to think that Burkina Faso's proposal is coming on behalf of youth without maturity or experience. I would not want people to think either that only revolutionaries speak in this way. I would want one to admit it is merely objectivity and obligation. And I can give examples of others who have advised not to repay the debt – revolutionaries and non-revolutionaries, young and old. I would mention Fidel Castro, for example, who said not to repay; he is not my age, even though he is a revolutionary. I would also mention François Mitterrand, who said that African countries, poor countries, could not repay. I would mention Madam Prime Minister [Norwegian Prime Minister Gro Harlem Brundtland] – I don't know her age and I would begrudge myself to ask her – but it's an example. I would also mention President Félix Houphouët-Boigny; he is not my age but he officially, publicly, declared that, at least as far as his own country is concerned, Ivory Coast cannot repay. Now, Ivory Coast is among the wealthiest countries in Africa, at least Francophone Africa; that is also why it naturally has to pay a

larger share here. Mister President, this is definitely not a provocation. I would like you to offer us some very intelligent solutions. I would want our conference to take on the urgent need to plainly say that we cannot repay the debt. Not in a warlike or bellicose spirit – but to prevent us from being individually assassinated. If Burkina Faso stands alone in refusing to pay, I will not be here for the next conference! But, with everyone’s support, which I need, with the support of everyone we would not have to pay. In doing so, we would devote our meager resources to our own development.

And I would like to conclude by saying that each time an African country buys a weapon, it is against an African country. It is not against a European country, it is not against an Asian country. It is against an African country. Consequently, we should take advantage of the debt issue to solve the weapons problem. I am a soldier and I carry a gun. But Mister President, I would want us to disarm. Because I carry the only gun I have and others have concealed guns or weapons that they have. So my dear brothers, with everyone’s support, we will make peace at home. We will also make use of our immense potentialities to develop Africa, because our soil and subsoil are rich. We have enough bodies and and a vast market – from North to South, East to West. We have enough intellectual capacity to create or at the very least use technology and science from wherever we find it.

Mister President, let us form this Addis-Ababa united front against debt. Let’s make the commitment to limiting armaments amongst weak and poor countries. The clubs and knives we buy are useless. Let’s also make the African market be the market for Africans: produce in Africa, transform in Africa, consume in Africa. Let’s produce what we need and let’s consume what we produce instead of importing. Burkina Faso came here showing the cotton fabric produced in Burkina Faso, weaved in Burkina Faso, sown in Burkina Faso, to dress citizens of Burkina Faso. Our delegation and I are dressed by our weavers, our peasants. There is not a single thread coming from Europe or America. I would not do a fashion show, but I would simply say that we must accept to live as African – that is the only way to live free and dignified.

I thank you, Mister President.

Patrie or death, we will overcome!

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*Editors Note: At the 1987 summit of the Organization of African Unity, Thomas Sankara warned that he would not live to attend another meeting if Burkina Faso were alone in resisting its debt obligations. A few months later, he was murdered in a coup backed by France for calling out the neocolonialist and imperial character of the debt imposed on African countries and calling for African unity and freedom.*

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