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# U.N. Symposium: *Combating Drought And Desertification*

By Abdulkadir N. Said

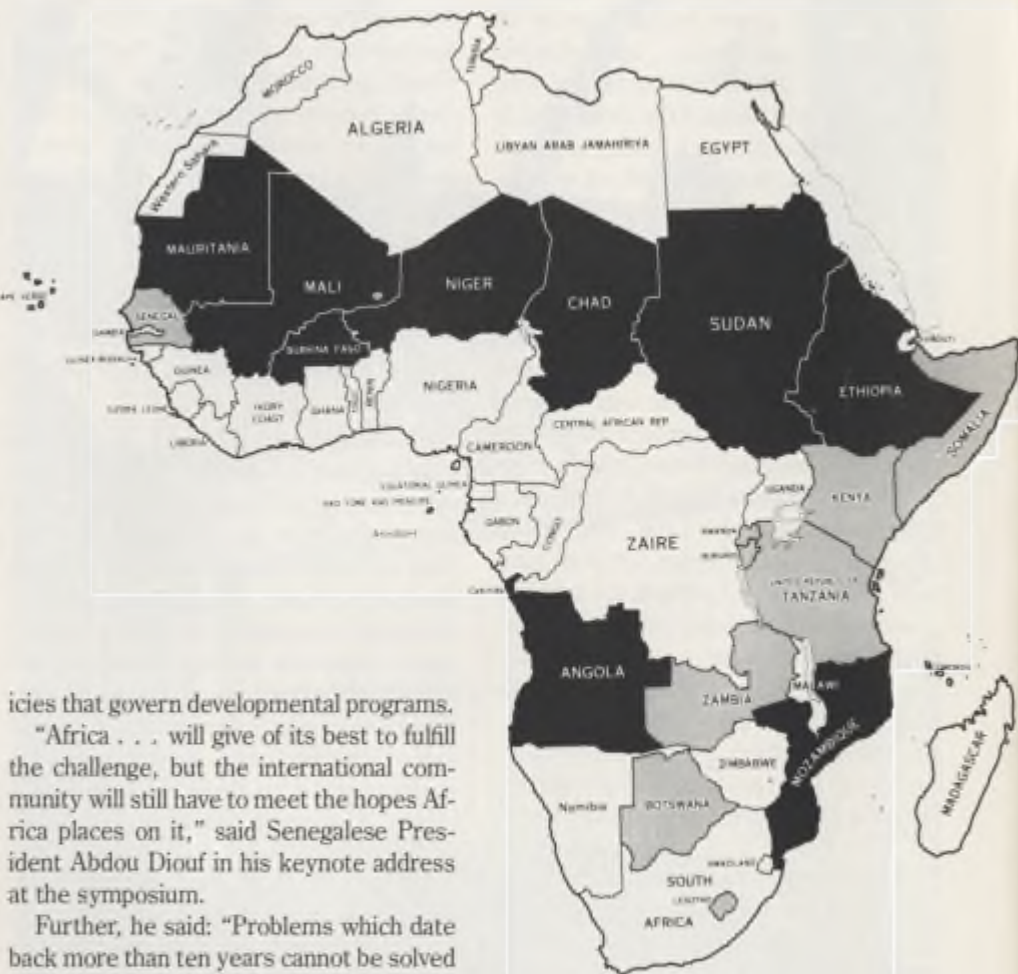
26 **F**or four days in October at Howard University, attention was focused on desertification in Africa and the plight of millions of victims of drought and famine in various parts of the continent.

The International Symposium on Drought and Desertification (October 24-27) rekindled interest by members of the media and the academic community in an African crisis that has lingered for more than a decade.

Intensified media coverage and in-depth interpretation of the African point of view, especially by members of the Black press in the United States, were emphasized during the symposium. In fact, one week before the symposium, about a dozen journalists were invited to Senegal ostensibly for a fact-finding mission. But their initial "eyewitness" report at the symposium was, for the most part, more on the emotional experience of being on the "motherland" and curiously short on journalistic facts. Then again, five days of what was akin to a "guided tour" hardly does suffice to give one a grasp of the myriad problems hindering the continent's progress.

It is conceivable that some of the journalists — and others as well — would travel to Africa on their own and bring back the real story of the many causes of Africa's current predicament, which by no means is limited to drought or desertification.

In both formal and informal encounters among the more than 300 participants, the message that came across was this: Africa needs to move in a new direction, to plan and develop substantive long-range projects aimed not only at abating desertification but also at lessening future human tragedies spawned by drought and famine. The consensus was, that this can be accomplished — in time — provided the authorities in Africa take bold new initiatives in overhauling ineffective or outdated pol-



icies that govern developmental programs.

"Africa . . . will give of its best to fulfill the challenge, but the international community will still have to meet the hopes Africa places on it," said Senegalese President Abdou Diouf in his keynote address at the symposium.

Further, he said: "Problems which date back more than ten years cannot be solved from one day to the next; African governments, bilateral and multilateral donors and non-governmental organizations will have to persevere in their efforts to improve the economic climate, overcome the impact of the drought and restart growth."

Among other recommendations, he called for: (1) greater dissemination of understanding of the problems of drought and desertification, (2) better media coverage of the causes and consequences of drought and desertification, and (3) encouragement to greater mobilization of resources to combat drought and halt the process of desertification. . . . (See excerpts from President Diouf's remarks in this issue.)

## EMERGENCY MAP

(Courtesy of the U.N. Office for Emergency Operations in Africa)

Consider the following assessment by the United Nations Office for Emergency Operations in Africa: As of June 1985, "despite the extensive efforts by African governments and the international com-



munity, the situation in the continent's most severely drought-stricken countries is continuing to deteriorate, particularly in the northern hemisphere.

"The number of those in need of food aid in the most critical countries is rising, and a serious shortfall in essential non-food survival items is taking its toll amongst groups weakened by hunger. In southern, central and eastern Africa, the early stages of the current rainy season have been, with a few exceptions, very promising. Initially, however, the rains are compounding the problem by inhibiting distribution of relief supplies and contributing to greater incidence of disease and mortality." Some of the 19 countries named in the report include Chad, Ethiopia, Mali, Mozambique, Niger and Sudan. (See map.)

During the last decade, more than 150 million people in several parts of the continent have fallen victim to drought and famine; as many as 30 million have faced starvation and about 10 million have abandoned their homes for refugee camps hundreds of miles away in search of food, medicine and shelter. The human toll as the result of malnutrition, hunger, disease or desperation is overwhelming. Visitors to refugee camps in the Horn of Africa, for example, have come back with horror stories and mounting statistics of death or displacement that are mind-boggling in this age of technology.

At a pre-symposium press briefing on Capitol Hill, Representative Mickey Leland of Texas, chairman of the House Select Committee on Hunger, who visited Africa twice between August 1983 and November 1984, dramatically shared his impressions:

"It was the most strenuous experience I have had in my life," he said as he spoke of a dying teenage girl in a refugee camp in Ethiopia. "We (Congressional delegation) saw people suffering, walking for miles to

get to feeding stations. We literally saw people dying in front of our eyes."

As a result of that first experience, Leland and his colleagues in the U. S. Congress were successful in the appropriation of more than \$50 million in aid for African famine relief. An additional \$800 million in supplemental appropriations was approved in 1984. Leland is also a key player in a recently-drafted \$350 million appropriations bill for non-food items.

"Malnutrition and starvation is a world problem," he said. "We can no longer isolate ourselves from the world."

Also, lest they be forgotten, Leland noted that in the United States, today, there are approximately 35 million poor Americans who cannot adequately provide for themselves or their families. Of this number, nearly 150,000 live in Houston, he said.

Bertin Borna, director of the United Nations Sudano-Sahelian Office, UNSO, who participated in the briefing with Congressman Leland and District of Columbia Representative Walter Fauntroy — among others — had this to say on desertification in Africa:

"UNSO has been working for the past decade in Africa on medium and long-term rehabilitation and development of Africa's environment. We have been particularly active in assisting African countries in the formulation of programs and projects designed to combat desertification on all fronts and in an integrated manner."

A UNSO study on desertification in the Sudano-Sahel zones alone points out the following grim facts:

In the last 50 years desert has engulfed over 650,000 square kilometers of Africa's once productive land, an area roughly the size of Somalia or France and Austria combined . . .

In 1983 alone, the northern edge of the "green belt," which appears across the Sahel at the height of the growing season,

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was pushed southwards by some 150 kilometers.

As productive lands become scarce, farmers are forced to cultivate fragile upland forests and marginal lowlands that cannot sustain yields . . .

The doubling of livestock population since 1950 is contributing to the destruction of rangelands . . .

The destruction of tree cover is dramatic, affecting nearly every country in the region . . .

On the famine front in the 1980s, the response of the international community has been gratifying to African governments and famine victims, especially after a British film crew brought back horrifying documentation of untold numbers of famine victims to millions of television viewers in England and the United States. However belated, media exposure in the United States did strike a responsive chord, generating the donation of tons of food, medicine and clothing from governmental agencies and private groups and individuals throughout the country.

The international symposium at Howard, with its multi co-sponsors (UNSO, Howard University and its African Studies and Research Program, the National Alliance of Third World Journalists, the National Association of Black Journalists and the Black Press Institute), served as a viable venue for the exchange of ideas and as a sounding board for new proposals or recommendations.

The symposium brought together a mix of personalities, most of whom were already well-versed on the affairs of the continent. They included policy makers, representatives of international organizations and donor nations such as the United States, consulting analysts, research scholars, journalists and students of African affairs.