

21st meeting

Friday, 2 July 1993, at 3.30 p.m.

President: Mr. Juan SOMAVÍA (Chile)

E/1993/SR.21

AGENDA ITEM 2

Coordination of the policies and activities of the specialized agencies and other bodies of the United Nations system related to the following themes (continued):

(a) Coordination of humanitarian assistance: emergency relief and the continuum to rehabilitation and development (continued)

Address by Mr. Isaias Afwerki, President of Eritrea

1. Mr. AFWERKI (President of Eritrea) said that he wished to draw attention to the uniqueness and gravity of the situation of his country and the special consideration it deserved from the international community.
2. The denial of justice to his people for almost half a century had led to Africa's longest war of national liberation, entailing immense loss of human life and property. The hard-won military victory achieved in May 1991 had been subsequently reinforced by legal and political instruments placing the settlement on a firm basis in international law. With its independence and sovereignty thus established and justice restored, Eritrea was an oasis of peace and stability. Moreover, Eritrea and Ethiopia, after decades of bitter war and hostility, had established harmonious ties of mutual trust and cooperation. As the Eritrean conflict had been one of the major causes of instability in the Horn of Africa, its resolution could be expected to enhance significantly the prospects of enduring peace in that still grievously afflicted area.
3. Peace had not, however, brought an end to misery and suffering in Eritrea. A quarter of the population was still in exile, and an equal number displaced within the country. That dispersal, among other results of war, had severely depressed national productivity, especially in agriculture, which continued to suffer acute shortages of capital, implements and facilities. The manufacturing industries that had existed in the 1950s and 1960s had been allowed to run down through negligence, wanton destruction and mismanagement, and the country did not have the necessary financial resources to renovate plants or purchase spare parts. Far from contributing to the growth of the national economy, the sector was currently a drain on meagre resources. The main port of Massawa had been destroyed and was operating below capacity. The railway line linking it with the capital, Asmara, and extending to major towns and cities in the western part of Eritrea, had been entirely dismantled. The principal roads and bridges were worn out for want of repair and the passage of tanks and other heavy weaponry.
4. The provision of basic services, such as running water and electricity, was confined to limited areas in a couple of cities. Medical services were almost non-existent. Education and training had been so seriously neglected as to threaten the country with a lack of qualified personnel to replace the pre-war generation.
5. The previous regime had not permitted the growth of civilian institutions, except a few attached to its military machine, and its collective distrust of Eritreans had meant that few could acquire training and experience in civil administration. The corrupt administrative policies and practices of the regime had left their mark on civic society.
6. That grim reality had been compounded by the recurrent droughts of the 1980s, which had greatly reduced vegetation, denuded forests, lowered the water table, and eroded fertile land, precipitating dangerous ecological degradation and destruction.
7. Thus, the people of Eritrea were living in appalling impoverishment. The situation was unique in the sense that it was not the result of wrong policies or mismanagement, but a legacy of occupation and war, and as such could not be readily reversed by policy reforms. Moreover, it had to be placed on record, not from a wish to assign blame but simply to put matters in historical perspective, that the 30-year war had come about as a result of the denial of basic human and national rights to Eritrea by the international community. The international community bore moral responsibility since the devastation wrought on his country had been carried out first through the support of the United States of America for the Haile Selassie regime, and, subsequently and much more brutally, through the support of the former Soviet Union for the Mengistu regime. But over and above those moral considerations, the magnitude of the problem, and the fact that it was not commensurate with the means and resources of the Eritrean people and its Gov-

ernment, was a compelling reason for the international community to assist in its resolution.

8. Recognizing the situation could only be remedied by a comprehensive and integrated approach, the Government had drawn up a programme of reconstruction and recovery. A full assessment had been made of the situation, a long-development strategy had been worked out, priorities had been set, feasibility studies made, projects formulated, and guidelines for implementation drafted and refined. The Government had attached particular attention to institution-building in order to establish an efficient civil administration and had given priority to the development of its human resources. The overall approach had also been linked to sectoral and regional measures so as to promote participatory development and devolution as a democratic mechanism.

9. Although seriously impeded initially by political controversy over the legal status of Eritrea, the Government had succeeded in putting the necessary institutional and administrative instruments in place in order to smooth the progress of the rehabilitation recovery programme. With the assistance of United Nations agencies, particularly the Department of Humanitarian Affairs, the Government had worked out a comprehensive programme for the phased repatriation and reintegration of the half million Eritrean refugees in Sudan.

10. What was so far conspicuously lacking was international assistance commensurate with the country's needs. He had deliberately avoided talking about relief, recovery and development assistance as separate items because the issues were inseparable in the case of Eritrea. The impact of assistance on recipient communities did, however, call for a special comment. The Government believed that all assistance must include built-in mechanisms of sustainability with a view to recovering at least part of the funds for other development projects and purposes. Such concepts as food for work, monetization of relief aid, rural and urban credit systems, revolving funds for long-term disaster relief, and concessionary loans must be explored, adapted, and expanded where

appropriate. Such mechanisms would reduce the burden on the donor community by recuperating at least part of the initial outlays and also help in restoring the dignity of the recipients.

11. In implementation of aspects of those mechanisms, various Government Departments, restructured as Ministries, had worked out programmes of rehabilitation and reconstruction, in such fields as afforestation, dam building, road repair and the drilling of wells, using relief aid as payment in kind to distressed but able-bodied citizens. Pilot schemes had been introduced to test the viability of a revolving fund, notably in the project to rebuild residential areas in Massawa destroyed by a hailstorm in April. The refugee repatriation and reintegration programme worked out with United Nations agencies had several components that encouraged the employment of returning persons and resident communities to build necessary infrastructures in the new and expanded settlement areas. On a more general level, government policy was not aimed at subsidizing basic services but at creating an enabling environment for the population to earn and pay for their social requirements.

12. Those policy directions could only have full meaning if Eritrea received significant support at the present critical stage to enable it to stand on its own feet. He hoped that the Council would take stock of that situation, and that the donor pledging conference on the repatriation and reintegration programme scheduled for 6 July 1993 would approach the whole scheme within that conceptual framework of initial and significant support so as to break the spiral of continuous relief hand-outs. In addition, his Government believed that the urgency and uniqueness of the situation required the convening of an international conference, possibly under United Nations auspices, in order to deal with the whole task of rehabilitation and recovery in an integrated and comprehensive manner.

13. The PRESIDENT announced that the Council had concluded the general discussion of agenda item 2 (a).

The meeting rose at 3.50 p.m.