

Southern Leaders Urged to Step Up Cooperation & Self-Reliance

by Thalif Deen

UNITED NATIONS (IPS)

As the 130 developing nations of the Group of 77 and China continue to work towards North-South cooperation, there is an even greater challenge facing leaders of the South: the need to step up the level of cooperation among themselves and strengthen self-reliance.

“As a trade union leader, my experience is that you get greater cooperation from the advantaged and the powerful when you demonstrate that you have alternatives,” says the prime minister of Antigua and Barbuda, Winston Baldwin Spencer, the current chair of the Group of 77.

Describing himself as prime minister of “one of the smallest and most vulnerable states in the world and chairman of the largest grouping of states in the world community,” he said that developing countries have a market size, a natural and human resource base, a financial capital resource base, and an increasing scientific and technological capacity that is able to fuel its own development.

The South has to capitalise on its growing strength, particularly at a time when current world growth and global economic stabilisation are being fuelled by countries of the South, but with little input into the policies which drive or retard such growth and stabilisation.

Speaking at the High-Level Doha Forum on ‘Democracy, Development and Free Trade’ in the Qatari capital in early April, the G77 chair warned that the upcoming meeting on Financing for Development (FfD) in November could be in jeopardy unless there is a genuine attempt to implement the promises and pledges in the ‘Monterrey Consensus’ adopted during the first FfD meeting in Mexico in 2002.

“The Monterrey Consensus which we will be reviewing places the burden of the responsibility for our own development on ourselves, even as the current global structures make this near



Winston Baldwin Spencer, Prime Minister of Antigua and Barbuda, and current chairman of the G-77.

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Free Trade Zone for Southern Africa ?

by Nergui Manalsuren

UNITED NATIONS (IPS)

At a U.N. press conference in mid-April, South African President Thabo Mbeki stressed the need for South-South cooperation among African nations and envisaged an eventual free trade zone in southern Africa.

Asked about the progress among countries of the region, he said: “Well, you know that the (African) continent is divided into five regions, essentially for these particular purposes. So, in our part of the continent, the Southern part, we have the Southern African Development Community (SADC), with 14 countries. It is based on the need for us to cooperate,” he said.

For instance, Mbeki pointed out, one of the agreements is to create a free trade area uniting all 14 countries. Such an agreement would also lead to a common customs union.

“And from there, you could expand to other regions, and strengthen cooperation from region to region.” It is based on the principle of South-South Cooperation, he said.

Asked about the growing economic and trade relations between India and Africa, Mbeki said: “Well, both the African continent and India felt there was a need to address cooperation between India and the continent.”

He said various agreements have been signed. India has agreed to provide duty-free, quota-free access to products from all of the 50 least developed countries (LDCs), the majority of them in Africa. That will go into effect immediately, he said. All the LDCs of Africa (34 out of 50) can now export anything and everything to India duty- and quota-free, as a means to assist in African development, Mbeki stressed.

The Indian government has also increased its credit lines to African countries so that they can access goods and services that help the continent’s

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An Opportunity to Take Stock of Successes and Challenges

Interview with Ambassador John W. Ashe, Permanent Representative of Antigua and Barbuda to the U.N.

UNITED NATIONS (IPS)

The long-awaited international conference on South-South Cooperation, which is scheduled to take place in early 2009, will provide an opportunity for developing nations to take stock of their achievements and challenges over the past 30 years since the original U.N. Conference on Technical Cooperation Among Developing Countries (TCDC) in Buenos Aires, says Ambassador John W. Ashe, permanent representative of Antigua and Barbuda.

“Since that initial conference we have seen a rising number of countries of the South that have become major players on the international scene,” Ambassador Ashe, who chairs the Group of 77 at the United Nations, told IPS U.N. Correspondent Mithre J. Sandrasagra.

The upcoming conference, he said, provides an ideal setting to discuss the best ways to draw upon the expertise and experience of these countries for the benefit of those who remain mired in extreme poverty. Additionally, even as new international players have emerged from within the ranks of the South, so too have new transnational challenges. These are challenges that cross borders and require multilateral actions -- such as climate change, rapid urbanisation and new diseases -- and have a disproportionate effect on developing countries.

“Thus, this conference comes at an opportune time to discuss and evaluate the current common opportunities and challenges facing the developing world,” he said.

To date, preparations are ongoing for the 2009 conference under the leadership of the President of the High-level Committee on South-South, assisted by the Special Unit for South-South Cooperation in UNDP.

Excerpts from the interview:

IPS: The U.N. has called for South-South Cooperation -- identified as one of the drivers of development effectiveness -- to be integrated into the development cooperation activities of all the organisations in the U.N. system. How can the G77 help with this process?

Ambassador John W. Ashe: It is well known that the G77 is a strong advocate for placing development on the international agenda and it will continue to do so. But apart from the G77's role as agenda setters within the U.N. system, there is a need for each member of

the G77 to emphasise the modality of South-South Cooperation within their national development plans.

The U.N. is meant to respond to the needs of member states and as much as we want to see them promote and use South-South mechanisms, it is up to us in our formulation of development strategies and priorities at the country level to emphasise South-South Cooperation and to take the lead in brokering cooperative development strategies that work at regional and subregional levels. In this sense, South-South Cooperation becomes more than a strategy option on paper, but



Ambassador John W. Ashe G77

more of a habitual mode of operation. Ultimately, this requires that developing countries become more outward- rather than inward-looking in their development planning, drawing upon the expertise and resources already available in the South.

IPS: Can the G77 help South-South Cooperation to be viewed from more of a development angle rather than a political one?

Ashe: Initially, the concept of South-South Cooperation emerged as a sense of political solidarity, which continues to some extent now, but in recent years the emphasis is on development as developing countries increasingly seek to stand together to meet pressing development challenges, particularly those that are transnational or cross-border in nature and are difficult to address by a single country. It is for developing countries to press for South-South Cooperation to assume a central place on the international

development agenda, though not as a substitute or alternative to the North-South Cooperation.

IPS: What progress has been made in elaborating the Development Platform of the South, mandated by the Second South Summit in 2005 in Qatar to create a framework of development options to support the participation and integration of developing countries into the global economy?

Ashe: There has been considerable progress made to date. The formulation of a Development Platform for the South was initially discussed by a G77 panel of experts that met in Kingston, Jamaica in 2005. The meeting agreed on the overall framework for a Platform and that further work needed to be done to complete the project. A follow-up meeting took place in 2007 at U.N. Headquarters which made substantial progress in further elaborating the Platform. A final meeting is to be held in St. John's, Antigua and Barbuda on Apr. 29-30, 2008 to conclude the Platform in relation to South-South Cooperation which has a greatly expanded potential for advancing our collective interests. Any follow-up work will be decided by the Group after submission of the Development Platform for appropriate action by IFCC-XII. We see the Development Platform as important to guide the overall policies and operational activities of the Group in strategic areas of interest to developing countries.

IPS: How will the June 2008 Intergovernmental Follow-up and Coordination Committee on Economic Cooperation among Developing Countries (IFCC-XII) -- to be attended by ministers and senior officials from G77 member States -- help to focus the outcomes and commitments of previous South Summits?

Ashe: The IFCC is a high-level intergovernmental forum to monitor and review the actions undertaken by member countries in the field of South-South Cooperation. Economic cooperation among developing countries, and in a more general sense, South-South cooperation, is an old and honourable goal of the Group of 77 which can be traced back to its very creation. Thanks to the generous offer of the government of Cote d'Ivoire, the IFCC will be held in Yamoussoukro on Jun. 10-13, 2008 to review recent progress and concrete actions undertaken in the field of South-South Cooperation in the context of the follow-up to and implementation of the outcome of the

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U.N. Conference on South-South Cooperation

Forward-Looking in Orientation

Interview with Mourad Ahmia, Executive Secretary of the Group of 77

UNITED NATIONS (IPS)

The high-level U.N. conference on South-South Cooperation must be forward-looking in its orientation, says Mourad Ahmia, executive secretary of the Group of 77.

Rather than merely singling out the progress achieved, the organisations of the U.N. system should also be able to point out the shortcomings, if any, and identify the main obstacles for South-South Cooperation, said Ahmia, who was one of the prime architects of the proposal for the conference back in 1994.

“They must also state clearly what they believe can be reasonably achieved in the near-term within available resources, and what could be additionally achieved, if there were increased resources for South-South Cooperation,” Ahmia told IPS.

Excerpts from the interview:

IPS: As a delegate, as far back as 1994, you proposed an international conference on South-South Cooperation and Development during Algeria’s chairmanship of the Group of 77, an initiative that was publicised in “South Magazine” one year after. Now that the conference is going to be a reality early next year, how significant is this conference for developing nations?

Mourad Ahmia: The convening of the High-level U.N. Conference on South-South Cooperation is very timely and of far reaching importance. In view of the multidisciplinary and multidimensional character of South-South Cooperation, the issue is within the ambit of many intergovernmental forums of the United Nations system. As you are aware, over the years the General Assembly, at the initiative of the Group of 77, adopted several resolutions specifically on South-South Cooperation at each of its regular sessions, urging support by the specialised agencies and other organisations of the U.N. system, to promote South-South Cooperation within their sectoral mandates. These resolutions contain broad calls to both developing and developed countries as well as the U.N. system to support the promotion of South-South Cooperation and call on the Secretary-

General to ensure effective coordination of relevant activities within the U.N. system.

A number of resolutions and decisions have also been adopted by the General Assembly and the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) on the occasion of the first United Nations Conference on South-South Cooperation held in Argentina in 1978. The Buenos Aires



Mourad Ahmia G77

Plan of Action has constituted the fundamental mandate for action and its detailed recommendations made specific and general calls to promote South-South Cooperation by the U.N. system.

Furthermore, while the outcomes of the South Summits of the Group of 77 and other follow-up sectoral conferences in themselves constitute the source of mandates for action by the United Nations system and various recommendations note or are tied to the activities of the U.N. system and foresee the support by the U.N. system for implementation, therefore the outcomes of G77 conferences and summits remain at the core of the structure of resolutions and decisions of the U.N. intergovernmental bodies which provide the bases for the U.N. system’s activities in support of South-South Cooperation.

IPS: What role did the U.N. play in developing the basic concept of South-

South Cooperation?

Ahmia: Even though the basic work on the concept of South-South Cooperation has been done by the developing countries themselves, the U.N. system has been a party to its evolution since the Group’s establishment in June 1964. Analyses of the global economy, reviews and appraisal of the internationally agreed development goals and the debates in the High-level Committee on South-South Cooperation, the General Assembly, ECOSOC, and other intergovernmental bodies have all contributed to refining the concept of South-South Cooperation. While many of the operative steps of South-South Cooperation are taken by the developing countries themselves, the U.N. system has a supportive role to play in promoting these steps through policy research and analysis and providing forums for dialogue. The emphasis is on forging links among developing countries in a diversity of fields and this can take full advantage of the wide variety of substantive sectors covered by the U.N. system.

IPS: Do you think the conference should adopt a plan of action to strengthen cooperation among developing nations? If so, what should be the priorities of such a plan of action?

Ahmia: The objective of South-South Cooperation is to achieve an expansion of the developing countries’ economies through forging of links among the developing countries themselves and thereby to expand the global economy as a whole for the ultimate benefit of all countries. For the U.N. conference to have concrete meaning, more than a rhetorical affirmation of the system’s commitment to South-South Cooperation will be required. It implies that the system will undertake a series of concrete steps which will lead demonstrably to improvement in the overall response to the South-South Cooperation mandates. The assessment of South-South Cooperation must be at the same time retrospective and forward-looking in its orientation.

* The full text of Mourad Ahmia’s article entitled “Prospects for a United Nations Conference on South-South Cooperation and Development (UNCSCD)” published in South Magazine, can be accessed at: <http://tedc1.undp.org/Coop>

“We Are Committed to Be Partners in Each Other’s Development”

Interview with Anand Sharma, India’s Minister of State for External Affairs

NEW DELHI (IPS)

As a senior politician associated with the movement against apartheid, it was natural for India’s minister of state for external affairs Anand Sharma to play a key role in the Apr. 7-9 India-Africa Summit.

“India and Africa have a special relationship,” Sharma explained to IPS correspondent Paranjoy Guha Thakurta. “India and Africa are seeking to create and share.”

Sharma, who, in 1994, was appointed a Commonwealth observer during the transition process and elections in South Africa, explained to IPS why India’s present engagement is the continuation of a long established policy of cooperation with African countries.

IPS: It is being said that the 2006 Beijing summit of African leaders was bigger than this one and that India is competing with China to engage with the countries of Africa.

Anand Sharma: Those who make such an unfair comparison are ignorant about the deep, time-tested ties between Africa and India. [Mohandas Karamchand] Gandhi, the father of the Indian nation, became politically aware while in South Africa. India’s first prime minister [Jawaharlal] Nehru had, as early as 1946, talked about the need for India to help anti-colonial movements in Africa and take up the issue of racial discrimination. Right through the 1950s and the 1960s, India supported the emergence of new nation-states in Africa. Gandhi and Nehru did not think of competing with anyone. India went to the United Nations on the issue of apartheid in South Africa. India has not suddenly learnt about the economic potential of Africa. Even during the mid-1960s when India was confronted with monumental challenges of development, when we were short of food, when we were much poorer, we started the ITEC (Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation) programme for countries in sub-Saharan Africa. All we had to offer were our skills and development experiences. Since then, tens of thousands of African students have come to India to study and be trained.

We do not have to embark on a new journey to discover Africa. The peoples of Africa are aware that what India has to offer is not the same as what others have to offer. We believe in capacity building and developing Africa’s human resources. Prime Minister Manmohan Singh has announced the establishment of an

India-Africa Volunteer Corps to focus on improvements in health care, informal education and empowerment of women. In the case of natural resources, we believe our collaborations must be mutually beneficial.

IPS: What, according to you, are the unique features of this summit?

Sharma: First and foremost, those who were invited to represent their countries or their regional economic groupings were not pre-selected by us but by the Africa Union (AU). It was the AU that worked out the structure and the format. The idea of this summit was first mooted in 2006 and it crystallised during the December 2006 visit of Prof. Alpha Konare, chairman of the AU Commission.

AU ensured that all regions of Africa are represented. The five founding countries of NEPAD [the New Partnership for Africa’s Development] -- South Africa, Nigeria, Senegal, Algeria and Egypt -- were represented together with Ethiopia, whose representative currently chairs the NEPAD Implementation Committee. We also have representation from eight Regional Economic Communities.

The meeting of foreign ministers discussed in detail the Framework of Cooperation and the Delhi Declaration. In Africa and in India, we are of the considered view that this summit will impart a new dimension and momentum to the partnership that is already there and evolving between Africa and India in the true spirit of South-South Cooperation.

IPS: Could you spell out the concrete achievements of this summit, the specific gains that have been made?

Sharma: An important focus was building the capacity and the skills of people. This, in turn, has been linked to agriculture and food security, in particular, to crop diversification, water management and building institutions for agricultural research.

Next is economic cooperation. Two-way trade between India and Africa exceeds 30 billion U.S. dollars a year at present. Trade has increased six-fold in the last five years and the potential to grow further is enormous. Trade will get an additional fillip with Tuesday’s announcement by India’s prime minister that India will now have a duty-free tariff preference scheme for exports from 50 least developed countries (LDCs), 34 of which are in Africa.

A lot of emphasis is being placed on education and information and communications technology. The Pan-African E-Network Project is being fully rolled out. All the dignitaries present have acknowledged with deep appre-

ciation this contribution that India has made for Africa’s development. The project is fully funded by India and is our gift to the people of Africa. The project has a dedicated satellite. It will connect the whole of Sub-Saharan Africa and help bridge the digital divide.

For us, this is a truly revolutionary initiative. The network will link the major universities of Africa and India and also connect major hospitals identified in different regions of Africa with super-specialty hospitals in India. Work on the project has made considerable progress and many universities and super-specialty hospitals in India and Africa are already linked.

IPS: Uganda’s President Yoweri Kaguta Museveni said during the summit that one of the mistakes that many African countries committed was paying inadequate attention to the development of private enterprises. What is the role the Indian private sector can play in Africa?

Sharma: It is important to note that privately-owned Indian companies have been following ethical and correct business practices in their African operations. Investments made by private Indian firms in Africa, be these in the areas of information technology, pharmaceuticals or agriculture, have enabled young men and women in the countries of operation. Local people have been trained in India as well in their own countries, their incomes have gone up, infrastructure has been improved. I believe that in every project, four-fifths or more of the persons employed and engaged as well as the managerial staff are of local origin.

IPS: On global issues, in what way can India and Africa collaborate?

Sharma: India and Africa are in agreement that multilateral organisations are in urgent need of reform. One is referring not only to the United Nations but also the Bretton Woods institutions like the World Bank and the IMF. India and Africa agree in principle that the membership of the U.N. Security Council should be expanded, both in terms of permanent and non-permanent members.

We are in agreement on climate change, particularly on the principle of common but differentiated responsibilities so that the process of development of developing countries is not interrupted and there is transfer of resources and clean technology. India and Africa also have common positions on agriculture in the Doha development round of the World Trade Organisation (WTO). The interests of Asia, Africa and Latin America converge on agriculture, particularly with respect to trade-distorting subsidies.

South Africa Welcomes Cuban Doctors

by Stephanie Nieuwoudt

Cape Town (IPS)

For more than a decade, Cuban doctors have filled part of a gap left by South African doctors who in large numbers leave the country looking for better salaries and employment opportunities.

According to Fidel Radebe, director of communications for South Africa's department of health, there are currently 134 Cuban doctors in the country working under a government-to-government agreement between Cuba and South Africa.

The first Cuban doctors who came to the country under this agreement arrived in 1996 -- two years after the African National Congress (ANC) came to power.

Socialist Cuba was a firm supporter of the anti-apartheid struggle in South Africa, and the ANC and other leftwing movements in South Africa always had a natural affinity for Cuba's stated struggle against "neo imperialism."

Fast forward to 2008 -- Radebe could not confirm rumours that negotiations were underway to bring a new batch of doctors to the country. "The department may in future consider the further recruitment of Cuban doctors as provided for in the government-to-government agreement, but details have not yet been finalised," he said.

IPS asked Radebe about how Cuban doctors have been received in South Africa. Some of their patients and colleagues have been harsh in their criticism. Patients have complained that some of the doctors are not properly trained and that they do not converse fluently in any of South Africa's 11 official languages, including English.

This kind of response, however, stands in sharp contrast to a number of papers and articles written by academics and journalists that praise the Cuban government for its accessible medical system and the high standards of training in that country. According to some figures there is one doctor for every 170 Cubans -- something

South Africa has no hope of achieving in the near future with only 74 doctors per 100,000 citizens.

Whatever the criticism, it cannot be denied -- some commentators say -- that Cuban doctors have brought invaluable resources to far-flung areas of the country where many South African doctors refuse to work due to insecurity, remoteness of the area, and a lack of proper salaries.

"These doctors provide an important service in places where only one doctor is often on call 24 hours a day, seven days a week," says Mike Waters, spokesperson for the opposition Democratic Alliance (DA).

Harald Pakendorf, a former newspaper editor and currently an independent political analyst, concurs that Cuban doctors play an important role in primary health care in South Africa. He also adds that the government should retain doctors, all of whom were trained at great cost to South African taxpayers.

"The government should appoint competent hospital administrators who can see to things like funding and the purchasing of equipment. Doctors should care for their patients. They should not have to worry about the availability of things like needles, sutures, swabs and medicines," Pakendorf said.

Regarding the criticism that Cuban doctors often lack the necessary skills, Radebe says that all doctors have to register with the Health Professions Council of South Africa and therefore have to meet certain professional standards.

According to Waters, the vacancy rates for medical specialists range from 51 percent in the central province of the Free State to a massive 86 percent in the northern Limpopo Province, near Zimbabwe. And it is in these empty spaces that the Cuban doctors are eagerly welcomed.

The situation in the Eastern Cape, South Africa's poorest province, is also desperate. Not only is there a lack of general practitioners, but there is also a demand for teaching staff at the medical school of the Walter Sisulu University

in Mthatha. A total of 32 Cuban specialists are currently attached to the medical school.

Karuna Krihanlal-Gopal, the acting director of marketing, communications and development at the university, says that the Cuban doctor-trainers "certainly bring a wealth of experience [to South Africa], having worked in similarly challenging circumstances prior to arriving in the country. They are also very dedicated teachers."

In 2007 Cuban doctors with 10 years experience or more who work in South African government hospitals and institutions were paid about 3,800 to 4,400 dollars per month, according to figures released by the DA. Relatively speaking, this might seem like a lot, compared to salaries in Cuba, but South African doctors emigrating to work in Europe, North America or the Antipodes could often treble their salaries by practicing overseas.

According to Radebe, several doctors have in the past opted to obtain permanent residency and citizenship in South Africa.

According to the government-to-government agreement, South Africa has also sent hundreds of medical students to Cuba to be trained there. From 1996 to 2007, 470 South Africans had been trained there.

Radebe says that there are many programmes to retain doctors in the South African public health system -- "revitalising of hospitals to provide a better clinical environment for health professionals, improving their conditions of service within the allocated budgets, providing better career progression and remuneration dispensations, providing specialist training, investing in new technologies and improving clinical management."

There are many suggestions on the table. But implementing them is another matter. Meanwhile, Cuban doctors are fulfilling a crucial role in plugging the hole left by South African doctors who are either unwilling to work in far-flung areas or who are themselves seeking greener pastures overseas.

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productive development. There are a whole range of South-South agreements in Africa, he said.

The products from 34 LDCs in Africa with duty-free access to India include cotton, cocoa, aluminum ore, copper ore, cashew nuts, cane sugar, readymade garments, fish fillets and non-industrial diamonds.

At the first India-Africa Summit in New Delhi in early April, Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh announced the duty-free tariff preference scheme for the world's 50 LDCs. Singh said: "We recognize the crucial importance of market access in ensuring the development dimension of international trade." He said that India and Africa would also work towards the establishment of an India-Africa Volunteer Corps, involving youth in development work.

Singh also assured enhanced opportunities for African students to pursue higher studies in India. As an immediate measure, he proposed to double long-term scholarships for undergraduate and post-graduate studies.

Are There More Spuds in Our Future?

by Ernest Corea

The world's food scene is gloomy. "Real prices are still below their mid-1970s peak, but they have reached their highest point since that time," points out Joachim von Braun, head of the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) in Washington DC.

Food stocks are being depleted. Food trade is skewed. These trends hit the world's already burdened poor, hard. Many of them have responded with violent protests in several countries including Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Cote d'Ivoire, Egypt, Haiti, Mauritania, and Senegal. Social unrest "may become common in other places in Africa," International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) Vice President Kanayo Nwanze, a highly reputed rice researcher, told a recent gathering of African Union (AU) finance ministers.

Against the backdrop of these developments, scientists and policymakers are looking to an unexpected source for its future contribution to global food supplies: the potato.

Some of the world's leading agricultural scientists met recently (Mar. 25-28) in Cusco, Peru -- best known as a capital of the historic Inca Empire -- for a conference on "Potato Science for the Poor." Conference organisers, the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) and the Lima-based International Potato Centre (CIP), noted that participants "shared insights and recent research results to develop strategies for increasing the productivity, profitability, and sustainability of potato-based systems."

Why pick this tuber for special attention? The short answer is that this is the International Year of the Potato, as resolved by the United Nations in 2005. (For the record, the potato is not alone in 2008, which is also the International Year of Sanitation.) Will interest in the potato be sustained, or will the fate of the tuber, after a year of international focus, go down the tubes?

Other "international years" have come and gone, with limited impact. For example, 2004 was the International Year of Rice but today, a mere four years later, the high price of rice raises fears of increased hunger and malnutrition accompanied by social turbulence. The price of rice has already doubled in 2008 (from 373 dollars a tonne

in January to 760 dollars a tonne at the end of March). Reacting to this price jump, Bangladesh Army Chief General Moeen Ahmed urged his fellow countrymen to decrease their consumption of rice and eat more potatoes, so as to reduce the demand for rice.

For two key reasons, interest in the potato serving as a major food crop in the South could outlast the International Year. First, of course, is the coincidence of skyrocketing food prices with a global focus on the potato. In addition to the prices of three major staples (rice, wheat, and corn), the prices of dairy products, meat, poultry, palm oil, and cassava have also risen. The fear of food riots, if nothing else, could spark new attempts to increase the production of major staples, and to renewed emphasis on another tier of food crops, such as the potato. This takes us directly to the second reason: the faith and confidence of the potato's "supporters" that the tuber's potential as a source of sustainable food security for the world's poor is substantial, and can in fact be fully realised. The International Year provides opportunities for the potential of the potato to be demonstrated, possibly leading to increased production and popularisation.

The mission of the International Year of the Potato is "to increase awareness of the importance of the potato as a food in developing nations, and promote research and development of potato-based systems as a means of contributing to achievement of the United Nations Millennium Development Goals (MDGs)." This involves scientific conferences, dialogues between scientists and farmers, a worldwide photographic contest to highlight the world of the potato, a potato growing contest for children, a travelling exhibit, and the issue of a commemorative stamp.

Many of these carefully planned events have laid the groundwork for South-South integration. Some examples: supported by CIP, a group of Latin American countries has formed a new Latin American Network for Potato Improvement and Dissemination; prospects for increased potato cultivation in Africa will be taken up by FAO regional conferences in Egypt and Kenya; Potato experts in Argentina have shared their knowledge with budding scientists from their own country and elsewhere in the region; In Asia, the Third International Late Blight Conference to be

held in Beijing will take stock of advances made by agricultural scientists in their efforts to combat the plant disease that caused Ireland's "potato famine" of 1845.

The potato often gets a bad rap as being harmful to health. Not so, say Ron and Nancy Goor, co-authors of "Eater's Choice," a guide to lowering cholesterol. They wrote: "Many people consider them [potatoes] highly caloric, and devoid of nutritional value. What injustice! Potatoes are filled with vitamins [particularly vitamin C], minerals, and protein. Eaten plain, they are low in calories, have no fat, and are extremely filling."

CIP's Director General Pamela K. Anderson puts the claims of the potato in a universal setting when she points out that "hundreds of millions of people in the developing world depend on potatoes for their survival and potatoes could play a major role in feeding the future population."

The potato is already the fourth most cultivated food crop in the world, after rice, wheat, and corn, but its link with the South is not well known. Thus, a "word association" exercise for "potato" would probably result in responses such as Ireland, whose connections with the potato are universally recognised; Norway, which is the home of a fiery, potato-based aquavit; and Dan Quayle, the former U.S. vice president who notoriously misspelled the word.

For the potato, the most significant association actually lies with the Andean region where it was discovered in its wild state and then cultivated, long before it spread across the world, making it South America's gift to the human family. The Spanish took it from its Andean home to Europe, where it was not immediately welcomed. Potatoes were considered unfit for eating because they were not mentioned in the Bible. The Society for the Prevention of an Unwholesome Diet (with the acronym "spud," a nickname that spread throughout the former British colonies during World War II) sought to ban its entry into Britain. Others took to the "spud," however, and before long it was sailing with European traders to Asia as well as to most of the rest of the world.

Currently, the potato is grown in over 120 countries. Until recently, major potato producing centres were in Western Europe,

North America, and countries of the former Soviet Union. FAO statistics show that as the demand for potatoes increased in the developing world so did its potato production. In 2005, potato production in the South exceeded that of the North for the first time. By 2007, it had jumped from 30 million tonnes in the 1960s to 165 million tonnes.

The potato is common to numerous cuisines that are not necessarily compatible with each other. It is a favourite in countries where spicy curries prevail, as well as in those where food is more sedately prepared.

Potatoes are popular in fast food outlets no less than in high-end restaurants. Annual worldwide consumption of "french fries" stands at over 11 million tonnes.

Any effort to expand the world's potato harvest benefits from plus points. Potatoes grow in different climatic conditions. They can be cultivated on less than optimum land. In the tropics, they can be harvested in 50 days. There are, as in any enterprise, problems to be surmounted too. Organisers of the Cusco conference summed these up as follows: the need for "improvements in the quality of planting material, farming

systems that make more sustainable use of natural resources, and potato varieties that have reduced water needs, greater resistance to pests and diseases, and resilience in the face of climate changes."

In addition, the way forward has to include post-harvest technologies that add value to the potato, fair trade practices, and innovative means to ensure that patents do not deny poor farmers access to new technologies. The challenges are many, but so are the opportunities, especially for South-South collaboration -- beyond the highlights of an International Year.

Ernest Corea has served as a senior consultant to the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR) at the World Bank. His publications include "North South: Beyond Dialogue" and "Non Alignment: The Dynamics of a Movement"

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impossible," the prime minister said.

He pointed out that the entrenched unequal distribution of political, institutional and economic advantage has made it possible to circumvent logic or to disregard it where it is provided for.

"I need only refer to the treatment of the determinations of the global conference on environment and development [Earth Summit] of 1992 and the international conference on financing for development (FFD) of 2002."

"Our review, as a global community, 10 years after the 1992 conference concluded unambiguously that there was a failure to implement the proposals for solution, especially by those most responsible. All the information available to me at this time is that our review of the second conference in Doha will lead to the same conclusion, and, like the assessment of the first, will confirm that the problem has gotten significantly worse. We had, and have, no global mechanism to enforce compliance by the powerful. That situation should be rectified."

The prime minister also said that institutional structures are now in need of a fundamental overhaul in a world where the initial membership of the United Nations of 51 has increased almost fourfold, to 192.

The reform mandated for the global governance structure, and the coherence required for the policies of various international bodies to complement and facilitate policy changes in the developing countries have not taken place, he said. Neither has the reform demanded of the international financing infrastructure. These proposed reforms were meant to increase the voice and participation of developing countries. But this has not been undertaken with any urgency.

Minimal adjustments being considered in the International Monetary Fund (IMF) will -- in all probability -- only increase the tension, with application restricted to a handful of developing countries.

He threw out a challenge to all leaders who will attend the Doha conference in November to rise above the narrow limits of the failed Monterrey process and transform it into a conference on the major systemic challenges facing the international community.

"Or at a minimum, put in place a process for a major 'Bretton Woods' type conference to address, in an integrated and consistent manner, the range of fundamental challenges facing us as a global community." The very survival of our planet, societies and economies depend upon our rising to that challenge, he declared.

continued from page 2 An Opportunity to Take Stock of Successes...

Second South Summit held in Doha in June 2005. South-South Cooperation is entering an exciting new phase, full of potentialities as well as challenges. There is, however, a great deal of work ahead. The IFCC meeting in Yamoussoukro signals the determination of the G77 to take on the challenge.

IPS: How do you assess the role of the United Nations system in promoting South-South Cooperation?

Ashe: Both, under the Buenos Aires Plan of Action (BAPA), and successive directives of the U.N. General Assembly as well as the G77 South Summits' mandates, the United Nations system is mandated to promote South-South Cooperation (SSC), especially in building and strengthening national capacities for development in various sectors. There has been a good deal of progress in this effort, which is being coordinated by the Special Unit for South-South Cooperation within the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). Indeed, the Special Unit receives its mandate from the High Level Committee on South-South Cooperation (HLC) of the U.N. General Assembly. The Special Unit for South-South Cooperation, as the U.N. system coordinator in this area, has indeed played a very important role in advocating and promoting SSC and fostering global South-South policy dialogue on major development issues. The G77, therefore, welcomes the new dynamism of the Unit, especially in recent years, in promoting the Group's development agenda.

Oxford University Publication on South-South Cooperation

UNITED NATIONS (IPS)

The Oxford University Press has published the second volume in a series of publications on the Group of 77. The 700-page publication is titled 'The Group of 77 at the United Nations: South-South Cooperation.'

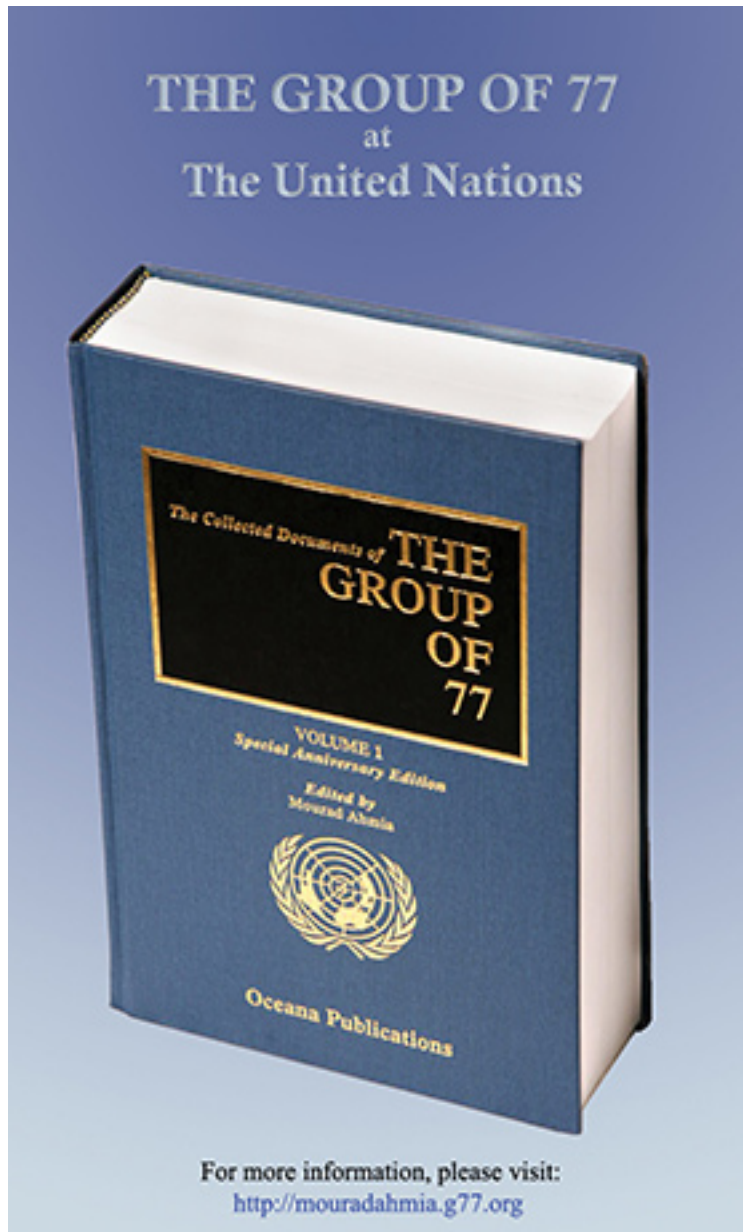
Edited by Mourad Ahmia, executive secretary of the Group of 77, the latest volume consists of intergovernmental documents that survey the rationale for South-South Cooperation, its scope and its modalities.

Additionally, it underlines the strategic role and mechanisms for implementation of South-South Cooperation, as articulated in various outcome documents issued by the Group of 77 since its establishment in 1964.

In a foreword, South African President Thabo Mbeki and Chair of the G77 for 2006 says the publication is "a unique and valuable source of information for policy-makers, researchers and the public at large."

As a compilation of major agreements and achievements, it will prove to be crucial in spreading public awareness and greater understanding of the importance of South-South Cooperation, he adds.

The first volume in the series titled 'Special Anniversary Edition' was also edited by



For more information, please visit:
<http://mouradahmia.g77.org>

Mourad Ahmia, and was published in 2006 on the occasion of the Group's fortieth anniversary with a foreword by Jamaican Prime Minister P.J. Patterson, Chair of the G77 for 2005.

In his foreword to that volume, the Prime Minister said the unique experience of the Group can only be shared if the relevant documentation, reflecting its various reports, declarations, agreements, resolutions and decisions are shared with the public at large. This valuable publication, he said, was particularly timely, following the Group's fortieth anniversary in June 2004 and its Second South Summit in June 2005.

The present volume, the second in the series, also provides a chronological record of events and documents of the Group of 77, with a special focus on the two South Summits, and other high-level follow-up conferences that took place during 1994-2005.

Future thematic volumes will be forthcoming in this series.

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