

Women playing larger role in African politics

By Moyiga Nduru
Special to Sentinel-Voice

PRETORIA, South Africa (NNPA) - "We must congratulate Rwanda for achieving 48.8 percent of women representation in parliament. This is the highest in the world. It means gender parity is no longer a dream but a reality in Africa," said Lulu Xingwana, South Africa's Deputy Minister of Minerals and Energy, to thunderous applause from over a thousand women who gathered recently in the capital, Pretoria.

Although Rwanda's elections took place in October 2003, the results are still news to many South African women — particularly those from the remote parts of the country. It is exactly this delay in the flow of information between South Africa and the rest of the continent that organizers of the recent meeting hope to address.

The conference, 'Women in Solidarity with the African Union for Democracy, Peace and Development', was held at the University of Pretoria under the auspices of the South African Women in Dialogue (SAWID) initiative.

The Pretoria meeting was intended to also help South African women forge stronger relations with their counterparts elsewhere in sub-Saharan Africa.

"The (South African) Department of Foreign Affairs has given us 2 million rand (about \$320,000) to dialogue with the civil society in the

Democratic Republic of Congo, Burundi and Sudan," said Zanele Mbeki, wife of President Thabo Mbeki, and convener of SAWID.

South Africa is trying to broker a peace in Burundi where, according to the London-based human rights watchdog, Amnesty International, more than 300,000 people have been killed since 1993 in civil conflict.

Discussions between SAWID and women from Sudan and Rwanda are also in the pipeline.

"The women want to know how South Africa handled the negotiations to dismantle the apartheid system and transition to democracy. They also want us to share with them how we managed to integrate our various forces into one army — and how we managed to collect all weapons from our fighters," Mbeki noted.

"These types of dialogue reveal the great value of creating further platforms for women to share their experiences and thereby facilitate the strengthening of women's participation in the management of peace and stability on our continent."

The challenges to introducing this stability are formidable, however. "Up to 350 million people, or half of Africa's population, live on less than one dollar a day. Life expectancy is 54 years, and only 58 percent have access to clean water," Thoko Mpumwana, a SAWID organizer, told the gathering. "It should be our agenda to

work for peace and democracy in Africa. We should not sit comfortably (in South Africa) when there's war in Africa."

The continent is also home to about 5 million refugees and more than 10 million internally displaced persons, according to a 2003 report by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. Most of these people are children and women.

In addition, Africa faces a massive challenge in the form of the HIV/AIDS pandemic. By 2003, about 28 million

(or 70 percent) of the almost 40 million people infected with HIV around the world were living in sub-Saharan Africa, according to the Joint UN Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS).

But South African women, who make up 52 percent of their country's population, believe they can make a difference — even in the face of these overwhelming odds.

"South Africa has a formidable powerhouse of women who can change the face of this country, and together with our sisters in the

continent — can change the face of Africa for the better," Mbeki said.

Four of the nine officials who head provincial governments in South Africa are women. Thirty-three percent of its legislators are women, 42 percent of cabinet posts are taken up by women, and 51 percent of deputy ministers are women, according to official statistics.

High-profile women in government include Foreign Affairs Minister Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma, who is attending an AU ministerial

meeting in Addis Ababa, in preparation for the summit. The extent to which the AU has itself managed to introduce gender equity in its various branches also came under discussion at the Pretoria gathering.

Sue Van Merwe, South Africa's Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs, says the AU wants 50 percent of all its posts filled by women within the next few years.

"Never again should women in Africa find themselves on the periphery," she told the conference.

African leaders urged to skip debt payments

Special to Sentinel-Voice

ADDIS ABABBA (NNPA) - Africa heads of state were advised to end their foreign debt repayments in the billions of dollars that have been draining fragile African economies and sending much needed cash reserves to foreign and western banks.

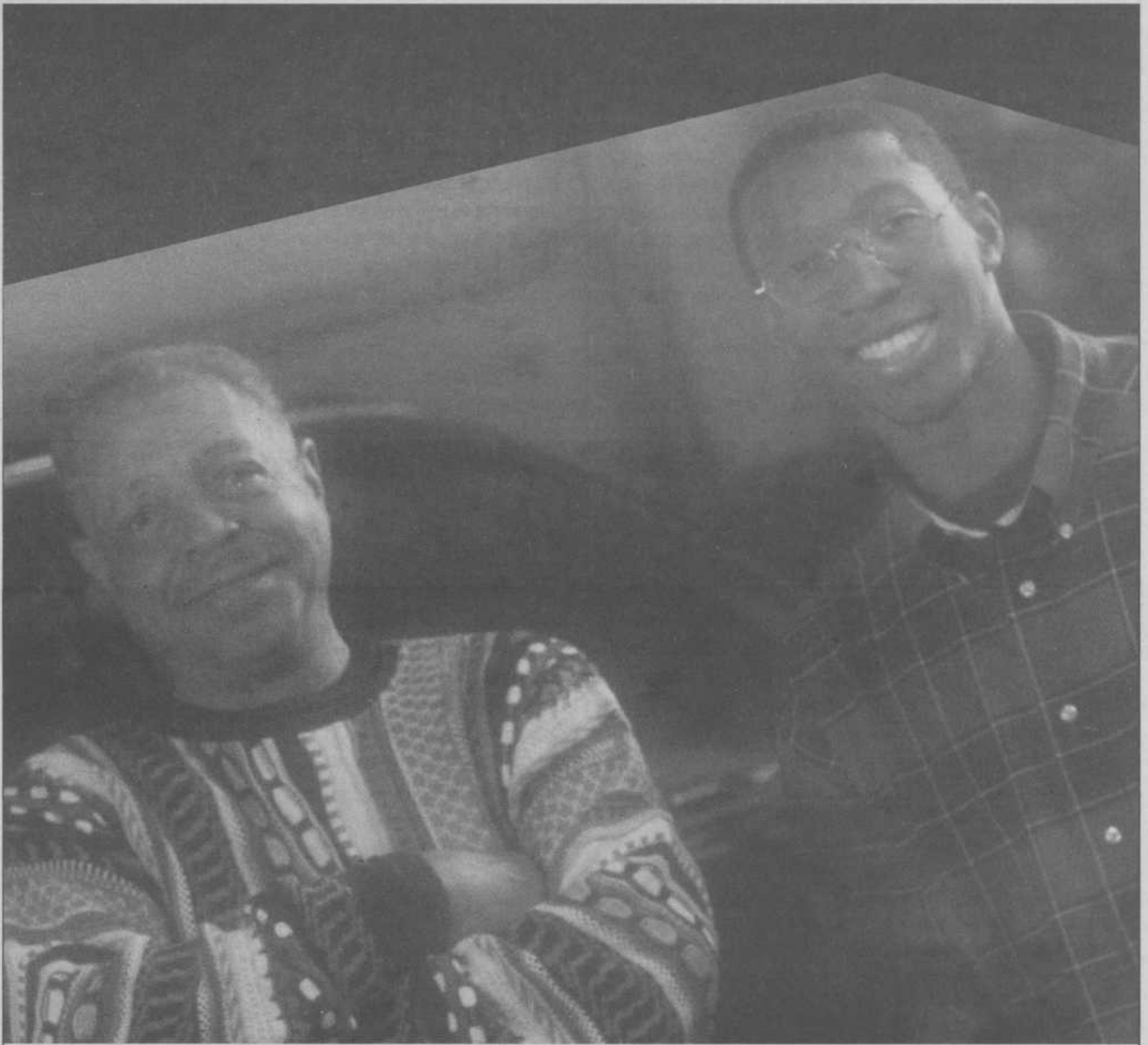
American economist Jeffrey Sachs, special economic advisor to U.N. Secretary General Kofi Annan, delivered that message to the African leaders recently at a conference on poverty on the eve of a meeting of the African Union in Addis Ababa.

Sachs, director of the Earth Institute at Columbia University and special adviser to Annan on anti-poverty targets, bluntly told the leaders to refuse to pay their huge debts if rich countries did not cancel them.

"The time has come to end this charade. The debts are unaffordable," said Sachs. "If (foreign banks) won't cancel the debts, I would suggest obstruction; you do it yourselves."

Sub-Saharan Africa's foreign debt is estimated at \$201 billion.

Sachs called on the developed world to double aid to Africa to \$120 billion a year and meet commitments they made in 1970 to spend at least 0.7 percent of their gross domestic product on grants and loans. The U.S. and other rich states spend billions of dollars on arms, but only a minute fraction on fighting poverty, he said.



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