

African First Ladies' Initiatives



by Remi Oyo

Abuja—The myriad crises affecting Africa have led the continent's first ladies to launch an initiative aimed at increasing their role in easing African problems.

They pledged, in a 15-point declaration issued at the end of the May 5-7 meeting of the Bureau of First Ladies in Africa, that they would engage in humanitarian activities to alleviate the effects of war.

They also asked to be included in peace missions sent by the Organization of African Unity (OAU) and the United Nations to conflict areas on the continent.

The first ladies aim to help mobilize resources for humanitarian work and to promote initiatives to "enhance peace in our respective countries and assist in ongoing conflict prevention, management and resolution efforts," according to the declaration read by Maryam Abacha, wife of the Nigerian head of state and chair of the Bureau.

The meeting was attended by the first ladies of 19 African countries, including Namibia, Ghana, Gabon, Gambia, Sierra Leone, Angola, Chad, Tanzania and Liberia, represented by Interim President Ruth Perry.

Some of the first ladies will present a detailed report of the meeting—which also condemned child labor, the use of children as soldiers, child prostitution and the use of landmines—at the June summit of the OAU in Harare, Zimbabwe.

Nine programs will be pursued vigorously by the women, including the formation of a Committee of Mediators to respond to the crises and emergencies that threaten peace and stabil-

ity in Africa, according to Maryam Abacha.

Speaking at the meeting's opening ceremony, OAU Secretary-General Salim Ahmed Salim said: "We at the OAU are ready to do whatever is within our means to facilitate such a mission which we believe is within our means to facilitate (and) which we believe would contribute to the search for peace and national reconciliation in countries which are currently at conflict."

He pledged that the OAU would also "do everything within our means to facilitate efforts to prevent, manage and resolve conflict and stop tragedies within the continent."

UN Secretary-General Koffi Annan also pledged UN support in a message relayed by his special adviser on gender, Angela King. He said the first ladies' initiative had come at a time when the continent was crippled by wars of monumental proportions.

In speech after speech, participants denounced the crises in Africa, ranging from hunger to war.

Maryam Abacha called for an independent African approach in resolving such crises to alleviate the work of international humanitarian bodies "who struggle to feed and clothe the millions of our fellow citizens suffering in refugee and rehabilitation camps."

Elizabeth Diouf, wife of Senegal's president, pledged the support of Senegalese women to the promotion of peace. She described the Abuja meeting as the beginning of a crusade against all forms of intolerance.

For Nana Rawlings of Ghana, the Abuja meeting was aimed at tapping

the full potential of Africa's women.

Except for some mention in the print and electronic media, the Abuja meeting generated little enthusiasm in this nation preoccupied with some of the ills the first ladies referred to.

One female human-rights activist told IPS by telephone from the western city of Benin that "the summit, in my opinion, paid lip service to peace in Africa because throughout their deliberations, the causes of strife in Africa were not discussed".

The activist, who did not want her name mentioned, said "most wars in the continent are caused by the lust for power of the leaders, a strong determination to perpetuate themselves in office and failure to accept defeat in elections."

She argued that the first ladies' declaration should have contained "strong condemnation for such actions of African leaders while representations should also be sent to those leaders guilty of causing wars." She added: "Perhaps such condemnation is difficult because some of the first ladies are beneficiaries of some of the causes I have underlined."

Sophie Oluwole, lecturer in the Department of Philosophy at the University of Lagos, also criticized the first ladies' summit, saying it was their husbands who were involved in the struggle for political power that causes the crises.

"They are not even involved in governance, so what is the basis for the meeting? Their places are in the homes," Oluwole argued.

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