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The International Conference on the Great Lakes Region

by Dr. Amb. Richard SEZIBERA

On 15 October 2006, Heads of state and government of the region signed in Nairobi, a Pact on security, stability and development within the framework of the International Conference on the Great Lakes region. It was an important moment in the pursuit of peace and development in this region which has been so far marked by conflicts, the victory of hope over pessimism.

Several groups of civil society were involved in the process which led first to the Declaration of Dar es Salaam in 2004, then to the Pact itself. They include women and youth associations, members of parliament, religious leaders, the handicapped, the media, etc. In Rwanda, the representatives of these groups were part of the national delegation during the negotiations. The Pact is consequently supported by large categories of the populations from the region.

The idea of an International Conference on the Great Lakes region dates back from November, 1996, when with the resolution no 3710 the Security Council proposed holding a conference under the patronage of UNO and OAU which would consider all the problems which this region is facing. The Security Council was especially worried about insecurity which was prevailing in east of Zaire (the current Democratic Republic of Congo, DRC) and the return of humanitarian agencies. It recommended stopping hostilities and encouraging the voluntary return of the Rwandan refugees to their country of origin: the cause of their exile being the lack of confidence of these Refugees in the new government of Kigali. For the latter, the real cause was the fact that millions of people were taken as hostages by genocidal forces: the neutralization of these forces was the only solution to the problem.

The first difficulty to overcome during the preparatory phase, which lasted from 1997 till 2003, was to determine who was going to steer this conference. UNO had shown itself incapable of resolving conflicts on the ground. OAU has always stuck on the sacrosanct principle of the respect for the sovereign power of States, a non-applicable principle in the situation of massive crimes committed by the State. The former colonial powers had been involved in the recent history of this region. Rwanda wished an African solution with international partners. In the UN Security Council, the role of initiatives on the region was entrusted to France whose credibility was questioned by the genocide of Tutsis. After several dialogues, a consensus emerged for the co-direction of UNO and OAU.

The second difficulty concerned the setting up of the theme of the conference: what was it going to be talked about? The situation had changed in DRC which is always engulfed in complex conflicts, in Burundi, the Tanzanian and South African mediators were busy resolving the civil war, in Rwanda, the refugees had returned massively. Four subjects were
finally retained: peace and security, democracy and good governance, economic and regional integration, social and humanitarian issues.

Finally, the third difficulty concerned the participants. After several dialogues, two categories of participants emerged from discussions: seven countries (seven core countries) directly affected by the ramifications of the Rwandan crisis (Burundi, Rwanda, DRC, Uganda, Tanzania, Zambia and Kenya) and the co-opted countries (co-opted countries) which are neighbors of those of the previous category (Angola, Congo, RCA and Sudan).

At the structural level, the preparatory phase knew a tension between the countries of the region which wanted to own this process and UNO who had given the idea of it. Finally the structures put into place (national coordinators, the joint secretariat UNO / OAU, regional meetings) allowed an interaction among the participants which decreased fear, hostility and mutual distrust which characterized their relations.

At the political level, it is the vision which suggested establishing programs for the future of the region, instead of mulling over the past, in order to make it a zone of peace and prosperity, which was adopted and was followed in the documents. But that fact did not put an end to the differences of visions and interests. That was to be illustrated by the request made by the joint secretariat UNO / OAU to admit FDLR as an observer: a proposal which was rejected but which provoked indignation from Rwanda and other member countries.

The purpose of the Pact is to provide a legal framework for the relations between States members to which it applies. The ten protocols which were adopted at that occasion were very much supported.

The International Conference on the Great Lakes Region, in spite of its controversial debuts, or maybe thanks to these, gives a solid base for the construction of peace in the Region.

It is certain that once implemented, the impressive content of its Protocols and projects, in the four thematic fields of the Conference, would transform the region of persevering conflict into a place of shared prosperity and development.

The Conference dedicates the double principle of ownership and crucial international partnership for the post-genocide reconstruction and development. An important number of the projects will be executed by or through the close cooperation with the existing Regional Communities. For that, its multilateral nature introduces an element of synergy with the existing groups without having to aggravate tensions. As regards Rwanda, the conference fills some gaps in the effort to approach the challenges of Peace, Security and Development in a holistic way. Whether this may remain on paper or serve as a real new direction towards a future of hope and prosperity for all, that depends to a large extent, on the efforts of the partnership forged during the preparatory phase. Its successes will also require an informed national and international leadership as well as the determination of a well-defined civil society.