

# **Thomas Sankara Speech Before the General Assembly of the United Nations**

I bring the fraternal greetings of a country covering 274,000 square kilometres, where 7 million men, women and children refuse henceforth to die of ignorance, hunger and thirst, even though they are not yet able to have a real life, after a quarter of a century as a sovereign State represented here at the United Nations.

I come to this thirty-ninth session of the General Assembly to speak on behalf of a people which, on the land of its ancestors, has chosen from now on to assert itself and to take responsibility for its own history, in both its positive and negative aspects, without any complexes.

I come here, mandated by the National Council of the Revolution of Burkina Faso, to express the views of my people on the problems that have been included on the General Assembly's agenda, which form the tragic background of the events which are sadly undermining the foundations of the world late in this twentieth century. It is a world of chaos, in which the human race is torn apart by struggles between the great and the not-so-great, attacked by armed bands and subjected to violence and plunder. It is a world in which the nations, eluding international jurisdiction, command groups beyond the law, which, with gun in hand, live by preying on others and organizing the most despicable kinds of trafficking.

I do not intend to enunciate dogmas here. I am neither a messiah nor a prophet. I possess no truths. My only ambition is a twofold aspiration: first, to be able to speak in simple language, the language of facts and clarity, on behalf of my people, the people of

Burkina Faso, and, secondly, to be able to express in my own way the feelings of that mass of people who are disinherited--those who belong to that world maliciously dubbed "the third world"--and to state, even if I cannot make them understood, the reasons that have led us to rise up, all of which explains our interest in the United Nations, the demands of our rights drawing strength in the clear awareness of our duties.

Nobody will be surprised to hear us associate the former Upper Volta, now Burkina Faso, with that despised rag-bag, the third world, which the other worlds invented at the time of our independence in order better to ensure our intellectual, cultural, economic and political alienation. We want to fit in there without at all justifying this great swindle of history, still less accepting that we are a backward world left behind by the West. Rather, we do so to affirm our awareness of belonging to a three-continent whole and to state, as one of the non-aligned countries, our deeply felt conviction that a special solidarity unites the three continents of Asia, Latin America and Africa in the same battle against the same political traffickers and economic exploiters.

Thus to recognize our presence in the third world is, to paraphrase José Martí, to affirm that we feel on our cheek every blow struck against every other man in the world. So far, we have turned the other cheek. The slaps in the face have been redoubled and the evil-doers have felt no tenderness in their hearts. They have trampled on the truth of the just. They have betrayed the word of Christ. They have turned His cross into a club, and after putting on His robe they have torn our bodies and souls to shreds. They have obscured His message, making it a Western one, whereas we saw it as a message of universal liberation. Now our eyes have been opened to the class struggle and there will be no more blows dealt against us. It must be proclaimed that there will be no salvation for our peoples unless we turn our backs

completely on all the models that all the charlatans of that type have tried to sell us for 20 years. There can be no salvation for us unless we reject those models; there can be no development without that break.

Now all the new "master minds" are awakening, roused by the dizzy increase of millions of men in rags and frightened by the threat to their digestion of this multitude hounded by hunger. They are beginning to change their tune and are again anxiously seeking among us miraculous ideas for new forms of development for our countries. In order to understand this it is necessary only to read the proceedings of innumerable colloquys and seminars.

I certainly do not wish to ridicule the patient effort of those honest intellectuals who, because they have tried to see, have observed the terrible consequences of the ravages caused in the third world by the so-called development specialists.

I fear that the results of all the energies seized by the Prósperos of all kinds may be turned into a magic wand to be used to turn us back in to a world of slavery, dressed up according to the taste of our times. This fear is justified by the fact that the African petite bourgeoisie with its diplomas, if not that of the whole third world, is not ready--whether because of intellectual laziness or simply because it has sampled the Western way of life--to give up its privileges. It therefore forgets that all true political struggle requires a rigorous theoretical debate, and it refuses to do the thinking necessary in order to invent the new concepts needed to wage the kind of struggle to the death that is ahead of us. A passive and pathetic consumer group, it overflows with the "in" words of the West, just as it overflows with its whisky and champagne, in salons where there is a dubious kind of harmony. One will search in vain-- the concepts of Blackness or the African personality now being a little outdated--for truly new ideas from

the brains of our so-called intellectual giants. Words and ideas come to us from elsewhere. Our professors, engineers and economists are content simply to add a little colouring, because they have brought from the European universities of which they are the products only their diplomas and the surface smoothness of adjectives and superlatives. It is urgently necessary that our qualified personnel and those who work with ideas learn that there is no innocent writing. In these tempestuous times, we cannot leave it to our enemies of the past and of the present to think and to imagine and to create. We also must do so.

Before it is too late--and it is already late--this élite, these men of Africa, of the third world, must come to their senses; in other words, they must turn to their own societies, they must look at this wretchedness that we have inherited, to understand that the battle for thought that will help the disinherited masses not only is not a vain one but can become credible at the international level. They must provide a faithful picture for their own peoples, a picture that will enable them to carry out profound changes in the social and political situation so that we can free ourselves from the foreign domination and exploitation that can lead our States only to failure.

This is something that we understood, we, the people of Burkina Faso, on that night of 4 August 1983, when the stars first began to shine in the heavens of our homeland. We had to take the lead of the peasant uprisings in the countryside, threatened by desertification, exhausted by hunger and thirst, and abandoned. We had to give some sense of meaning to the revolts of the unemployed urban masses, frustrated and tired of seeing the limousines of the alienated élite flash by following the head of State, who offered them only false solutions devised and conceived in the brains of others. We had to give an ideological soul to the just struggles of our masses mobilized against the

monstrosity of imperialism. Instead of a minor, short-lived revolt, we had to have revolution, the eternal struggle against all domination. Others have noted this before me and yet others will say after me how broad the gap now is between the rich peoples and those that aspire only to have enough to eat, enough to drink, to survive and to defend their dignity, but nobody could believe how much of the food of our people has gone to feed the rich man's cow.

In the case of Upper Volta, the process was even more crystal clear. We demonstrated the essence of all the calamities that have crushed the so-called developing countries.

The truth about aid, represented as the panacea for all ills and often praised beyond all rhyme or reason, has been revealed. Very few countries have been so inundated with aid of all kinds as has mine.

Aid is supposed to help development, but one can look in vain in what used to be Upper Volta to see any sign of any kind of development. The people who were in power through either naivety or class selfishness could not or else did not want to gain control over this inflow from the outside or grasp the scope of it and use it in the interests of our people.

Analysing a table that was published in 1983 by the Sahel Club, Jacques Giri, in his book entitled *The Sahel Tomorrow*, concluded quite sensibly that aid to the Sahel, because of its content and because of the machinery in place, was only aid for survival. He emphasized that only 30 per cent of that aid would enable the Sahel simply to remain alive. According to Jacques Giri, this outside aid was designed only for the continued development of the unproductive sectors, imposing intolerable burdens on our small budgets, completely disrupting our countryside, creating

deficits in our trade balance and, in fact, speeding up our indebtedness.

Here are just a few standard facts to describe what Upper Volta used to be like: 7 million inhabitants, with more than 6 million peasants; infant mortality at 180 per 1,000; life expectancy of 40 years; an illiteracy rate of 98 per cent, if literacy is considered to mean being able to read, write and speak a language; one doctor for 50,000 inhabitants; 16 per cent receiving schooling; and lastly, a gross domestic product of 53,356 CFA francs, that is, just over \$100 per capita.

The diagnosis obviously was a very bad one. The source of the evil was political and so the only cure must be a political one.

Of course, we encourage aid that can help us to manage without aid, but in general the aid and assistance policies merely led us to become completely disorganized, to enslave ourselves, to shirk our responsibility in our economic, political and cultural areas.

We have chosen a different path to achieve better results. We have chosen to establish new techniques. We have chosen to seek forms of organization that are better adapted to our civilization, abruptly and once and for all rejecting all kinds of outside diktats, so that we can create the conditions for a dignity in keeping with our ambitions.

We refuse simple survival. We want to ease the pressures, to free our countryside from medieval stagnation or regression. We want to democratize our society, to open up our minds to a universe of collective responsibility, so that we may be bold enough to invent the future. We want to change the administration and reconstruct it with a different kind of civil servant. We want to get our army involved with the people in productive work and remind it

constantly that, without patriotic training, a soldier is only a criminal with power. That is our political programme.

At the economic level, we are learning to live simply, to accept and to demand of ourselves the austerity that we need in order to carry out our great designs.

Thanks to the revolutionary solidarity fund, which is fed by voluntary contributions, we are now beginning to deal with the cruel questions posed by the drought. We support and have applied the principles of the Declaration of Alma-Ata/ expanding our primary health care. We endorse as a State policy the global strategy of GOBI FFF advocated by UNICEF.

We believe that through the United Nations Sudano-Sahelian Office, the United Nations should enable those countries affected by drought to establish a medium- and long-term plan to achieve selfsufficiency in food.

To prepare for the twenty-first century, we have begun, by creating a special tombola section, an immense campaign for the education and training of our children in a new school. The programme is called "Let's teach our children". Through committees to defend the revolution, we have established a vast house-building programme--500 units in three months--and we are also building roads, small water collectors, and so forth. Our economic ambition is to work to ensure that the use of the mind and the strength of each inhabitant of Burkina Faso will produce what is necessary to provide two meals a day and drinking-water.

We swear that in future in Burkina Faso nothing will be done without the participation of the people of Burkina Faso themselves, nothing that has not been decided by us, that has not

been prepared by us. There shall be no more attacks on our honour and dignity.

Strengthened by this conviction, we want our words to cover all those who suffer, all those whose dignity has been crushed by a minority or a system.

Let me say to those who are listening to me now that I speak not only on behalf of Burkina Faso, my country which I love so much, but also on behalf of all those who suffer, wherever they may be.

I speak on behalf of those millions of human beings who are in ghettos because their skin is black, or because they have a different kind of culture, those whose status is hardly higher than that of an animal.

I suffer, too, on behalf of those Indians who have been massacred, trampled on and humiliated and who, for centuries, have been confined to reservations, so that they do not have any aspirations to any rights whatsoever, so that their culture cannot become enriched through contact with other cultures, including that of the invader.

I speak out on behalf of those who are unemployed because of a structurally unjust system which has now been completely disrupted, the unemployed who have been reduced to seeing their lives as only the reflection of the lives of those who have more than themselves.

I speak on behalf of women throughout the entire world who suffer from a system of exploitation imposed on them by men. As far as we are concerned, we are willing to welcome all suggestions from anywhere in the world that will help us to promote the full development and prosperity of the women of Burkina Faso. In



return, we will share with all countries the positive experience we are now undertaking with our women, who are now involved at all levels of the State apparatus and social life in Burkina Faso, women who struggle and who say with us that the slave who will not shoulder responsibility to rebel does not deserve pity. That slave will alone be responsible for his own wretchedness if he has any illusions whatsoever about the suspect indulgence shown by a master who pretends to give him freedom. Only struggle helps us to become free, and we call on all our sisters of all races to rise up to regain their rights.

I speak on behalf of the mothers of our poor countries who see their children dying of malaria and diarrhoea, unaware that to save them there are simple methods available but which the science of the multinationals does not offer to them, preferring to invest in cosmetics laboratories and engage in cosmetic surgery to satisfy the whims and caprices of a few men and women who feel they have become too fat because of too many calories in the rich food they consume with regularity. That must make even members of this Assembly dizzy--not to mention the peoples of the Sahel. We have decided to adopt and popularize the methods that have been advocated by WHO and UNICEF.

I speak on behalf of the child, the child of the poor man, who is hungry and who furtively eyes the wealth piled up in the rich man's shop, a shop that is protected by a thick window, a window which is defended by an impassable grille, the grille guarded by a policeman in a helmet with gloves and a bludgeon, the policeman placed there by the father of another child, who comes there to serve himself or rather to be served because these are the guarantees of capitalistic representativeness and norms of the system.

I speak on behalf of the artists--poets, painters, sculptors, musicians, actors and so on--people of good will who see their art being prostituted by the show-business magicians.

I cry out on behalf of the journalists who have been reduced to silence or else to lies simply to avoid the hardships of unemployment.

I protest on behalf of the athletes of the entire world whose muscles are being exploited by political systems or by those who deal in the modern slavery of the stadium.

My country is the essence of all the miseries of peoples, a tragic synthesis of all the suffering of mankind but also, and above all, the synthesis of the hopes of our struggles. That is why I speak out on behalf of the sick who are anxiously looking to see what science can do for them--but that science has been taken over by the gun merchants. My thoughts go to all those who have been affected by the destruction of nature, those 30 million who are dying every year, crushed by that most fearsome weapon, hunger.

As a soldier, I cannot forget that obedient soldier who does what he is told, whose finger is on the trigger and who knows that the bullet which is going to leave his gun will bring only a message of death.

Lastly, I speak out in indignation as I think of the Palestinians, whom this most inhuman humanity has replaced with another people, a people who only yesterday were themselves being martyred at leisure. I think of the valiant Palestinian people, the families which have been splintered and split up and are wandering throughout the world seeking asylum. Courageous, determined, stoic and tireless, the Palestinians remind us all of

the need and moral obligation to respect the rights of a people. Along with their Jewish brothers, they are anti-Zionists.

Standing alongside my soldier brothers of Iran and Iraq, who are dying in a fratricidal and suicidal war, I wish also to feel close to my comrades of Nicaragua, whose ports are being mined, whose towns are being bombed and who, despite all, face up with courage and lucidity to their fate. I suffer with all those in Latin America who are suffering from imperialist domination.

I wish to stand side by side with the peoples of Afghanistan and Ireland, the peoples of Grenada and East Timor, each of those peoples seeking happiness in keeping with their dignity and the laws of their own culture.

I rise up on behalf of all who seek in vain any forum in the world to make their voices heard and to have themselves taken seriously.