

# Africa African Nightmare

The bleakest story of the Third World is Africa.  
**Michael Holman** explores the tragedy of a  
continent, while **Glenys Kinnock** sees hope for South Africa



Keith Bernstein/Select

**S**ub-Saharan Africa is in the grip of a crisis that may well become a catastrophe beyond the capacity of Africans alone to resolve, but played out before a world preoccupied by other concerns.

Some 30m Africans face starvation; another 450m or so across the continent struggle for survival, amidst political turmoil which has left barely a country untouched. Almost wherever one looks, from Angola to Zambia, from Mali to Mozambique, the ossified political structures of post-independence Africa

are cracking. From across the continent come calls for multi-party systems. Political adjustment is catching up with the economic adjustment programmes under way in more than 30 African states.

The cry for democracy, however, is as much a moan of pain and despair caused by the economic failures over three decades of independence. There are glimmerings of hope: southern Africa, liberated from apartheid, is moving towards peace and rehabilitation; and prospects for the Horn of Africa have improved in the wake of President

Mengistu Haile Mariam's departure. But the political and economic process under way in Africa is complex and fragile, and the continent is delicately poised between reform and further decline.

The crisis is deep-rooted, and in those roots lie at least part of the explanation of some of today's problems. The sad record of the independence years, disfigured by over 70 coups, the emergence of military regimes and authoritarian one-party states, and a steady decline, dominate impressions of the continent.

Yet as with Yugoslavia, to understand contemporary Africa one must go back to the events of the last century and earlier. The Organisation of African Unity's (OAU) recent call on the West to make 'reparation' for the slave trade to the West Indies and the Americas is almost risible in its sheer impracticality. But this should not obscure the lasting impact this trauma has had on the continent.

**W**hat is sometimes described as Africa's holocaust finally ended barely 100 years ago. It was, as Basil Davidson writes in his book about the slave business, *Mother Africa*, the greatest forced migration in the history of humanity. Between 1650 and 1850, the period when the trade flourished, some 12m slaves were landed in the Americas, according to one estimate. It is calculated that 2m perished on the journey and 7m died before embarkation.

The experience left African communities shattered, villages bereft of the able-bodied, and ethnic states and kingdoms destabilised.

Yet as slavery was coming to an end another traumatic period was beginning. In what became known as 'the scramble for Africa', Britain, France, Germany, Portugal, Belgium, Italy and Spain all staked territorial claims, in the process usually disregarding the boundaries of the indigenous nation-states of Africa and overturning the societies they encountered.

'One of the most serious consequences of European colonisation in Africa', writes the historian Ali Mazrui, in his book, *The Africans*, 'has been the destruction of Africa's own legitimate institutions and structures of authority'. He continues: 'The initial military triumph of European power over the local rulers was itself enough of a strain on the historic prestige of indigenous monarchies and institutions of governance. But that initial European military triumph was followed by decades of European overlordship, with policies deliberately calculated to change the nature of Africa's political processes for ever'.

Africa's post-independence failure to develop durable and democratic political systems and institutions – an important factor behind the continent's current malaise – is at least in part explained by the past.

Alongside these historical factors

# Freedom Sounds



Nigel Dickinson

Apartheid is dying. But if the post-apartheid needs of South Africa do not get proper attention, the consequences of institutionalised racism could haunt generations to come. If political changes are not translated into tangible social changes, the legacy of the system which a majority government will inherit could well leave an indelible mark. The newly acquired freedoms of South Africans must be genuine and real. They will need more than applause and congratulations from us.

South Africans see their political rights as both ends and means. They are an expression of their dignity as free human beings and the instrument for full economic, social and political rights in the future. There is anxiety among black South Africans that the current focus on political change has camouflaged the enormous needs which span all aspects of social and economic life.

Experience has shown that all too often support can be generated for political change, but once that is achieved the support for building a new society can be more difficult to maintain. Namibia is an example of this. I visited Namibia as an observer of the election process in 1989. I felt the outrage which any democrat would feel in a country whose riches were being denied to the majority by a minority of 7000 whites, and by an apar-

theid system which spent vast amounts of money applying its bigoted obsession, having created 11 different racial and tribal authorities.

Yet Namibia's first faltering steps out of the darkness of injustice, poverty and oppression have not been met with the strong international support they need. This should be a warning to those who predict that the post-apartheid needs of South Africa will gain an easy and generous response.

Already there is optimism about change in South Africa. But even when the constitutional changes do take place, the people who face the everyday reality of life in the townships and impoverished rural areas of South Africa know that their task is just beginning. A free and non-racial society must be allowed to prosper, and must also be given the practical assistance required to make freedom a reality as well as an inspiration.

Black South Africans, after years of repression and deprivation, look forward to adequate health care and housing; to schools which are open to all for as long as required; to training for jobs irrespective of colour, gender or religion. At the grassroots, many organisations in South Africa naturally share these hopes and aspirations.

The inequalities inherent in decades of racism have left

people with a huge task in trying to cope, for instance, with the diseases of poverty, epidemic among South African children. A development agenda for a democratic South Africa has, however, been formulated by people's organisations inside the country. Its shape and framework are becoming visible. A key feature of the analysis is the fear that less organised people will not gain their full share of the benefits offered by a post-apartheid South Africa.

Women, especially those in the rural areas, for example, may be in danger of being almost entirely neglected. And yet women – the mothers and producers – should be central to the development process and part of the implementation and evaluation of programmes. Those people, marginalised by their poverty and relative powerlessness, should be drawn in to develop the assets, services and skills in ways which they themselves feel appropriate.

Development is clearly understood by South African organisations to be an integral part of social and economic change. They are already committed to development work which, especially in the areas of education and training, strengthens and empowers local communities. Local people are being supported as they manage the resources they

already have and are prepared for a future which will offer increased resources.

South Africa's community and development organisations have been used to meeting their own needs within the context of a hostile and repressive political environment. Courage, imagination, ingenuity, and effort have already gone into providing health, education, childcare and advice centres throughout the country. The experience and knowledge which has been gained by those working for the transformation from apartheid to democracy should be encouraged and harnessed. A real opportunity exists for development to occur supported by the enabling power of a new democratic state.

For non-governmental organisations in South Africa, life under a properly constituted and elected government will be a liberating experience. However, for everyone there will be the difficulties, conflicts and tensions which change will bring. There is no place for naive hopes of instant transformation and none will be given. Instead, the courage and resourcefulness which local communities have shown in the anti-apartheid struggle can now, with practical support, become the engine of change which will benefit everyone. ●

Glenys Kinnock