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The Good
Guys?**

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Venezuelan President Chávez

'The U.N. has Cancer'

When the Summit outcome document is put to a vote, many of its endorsers will be the same folk who applauded yesterday when President Hugo Chavez denounced it as "unlawful".

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Are the Europeans Really the Good Guys?

Europe has been trumpeting its achievements in supporting development all summit long, but is the region ready to take the difficult steps in the areas of trade and debt so essential to the MDGs' success?

By Harmonie Toros

They dole out 55 percent of the world's aid, champion the cancellation of debt, even seek to find new ways to raise money for the poor across the globe. It's Europe the Good, the Valiant, the Defender of Development, that its leaders have showcased at this week's summit.

"The EU is proud of what we are doing, we are the biggest aid donors in the world, we are also the most open market in the world. At [the G-8 Summit in] Gleneagles, we have shown our commitment: 80 percent of the extra aid pledged there will come from Europe," said European Commission President Jose Manuel Barroso yesterday.

But the Europeans have been suspiciously tight-lipped on trade barriers and agricultural subsidies, and when asked to name names of who could be doing more, rock star and debt relief activist Bob Geldof surprised many by pointing a finger at the ODA-generous Dutch and Belgians.

It seems the two European Union countries are not too pleased with the G8 pledge to cancel the debt of 18 Highly Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC), and they apparently do not like to be told what to do by nations whose aid records are bleak. The Dutch give 0.8 percent of gross national product and the Belgians 0.61 percent as development aid each year.

The Global Call to Action Against Poverty (GCAP) accused Belgium and the Netherlands of trying to "derail the deal [at an upcoming IMF/World Bank meeting] by phasing its implementa-



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tion, which will put at risk immediate funding of cancellation and impose extra conditions on poor countries."

"Delays in debt cancellation come at a high cost for the world's poorest countries and their people," said Kumi Naidoo of GCAP. "Every dollar spent on crippling debt is a dollar not spent on food, education, and fighting diseases."

Belgium and the Netherlands "have very valid reasons, sovereign reasons, why they may not agree with the package outlined, but what is that in the face of Malawi, in the face of Niger, or the daily grind of sickening debt... the pornography of poverty that parades across our screens every night," said Bob Geldof, who stole the limelight at a news conference on progress since Gleneagles from British Prime Minister Tony Blair, Nigerian President Olusegun Obasanjo and Barroso.

"Don't hold us back, Holland!

Belgium and the Netherlands "have very valid reasons, sovereign reasons, why they may not agree with the package outlined, but what is that in the face of Malawi, in the face of Niger, or the daily grind of sickening debt... the pornography of poverty that parades across our screens every night," said Bob Geldof.

Don't hold us back, Belgium!" pleaded Geldof.

Marie-Christine Lanser, spokesperson for the Dutch Minister for Development Cooperation, said that the Netherlands was working to get the best possible debt cancellation deal, which should come on top of current aid levels and should include greater market access.

"We have time before the World Bank meeting to make it the best debt cancellation," Lanser told

Terraviva, adding that the Dutch minister would likely be meeting Geldof today.

Europe risks even being outdone by the US administration after President George W. Bush announced in his speech to the General Assembly Wednesday that Washington was willing "to eliminate all tariffs, subsidies and other barriers to free flow of goods and services as other nations do the same."

But in uncharacteristically

frank talk, Blair said countries had to walk the talk if they are to reach an agreement during the December round of WTO negotiations in Hong Kong.

"The fact is that everybody around the world is trying to call each other's bluff on world trade. You know 'we'll get rid of all our tariffs and subsidies if you get rid of yours'," the British premier said.

"We have got to start calling these bluffs," Blair challenged.

"This is *the* test. And it is not just the test for the main countries and the main trading blocks, it is the test of whether international cooperation is prepared to live up to the demands of the interdependent international community we live in today."

Agreement could mean that France would have to give up at least some of the cherished agricultural subsidies that it negotiated hard for in the EU's Common Agricultural Policy (CAP).

Prime Minister Dominique de Villepin stayed clear of any mention of subsidies and barriers during his press conference yesterday, but a French diplomatic source said France was "ready to work with all partners on this issue".

"When we see what the US is doing, we as Europeans have no reason to blush," said the source, speaking on condition of anonymity.

Barroso acknowledged that Europe could not simply rest on its laurels: "We can do more and we can do more at the European level," said the former Portuguese premier.

"I believe the name of the game is push and push and push," said Nigeria's Obasanjo, speaking on behalf of the African Union.

Geldof is sure to push.

"Hong Kong is 100 days away and we do not have anything like the language... that will give us a flight path to a good success," he said.

Chavez Sees U.N. as Dying Body

Venezuela's president criticises the General Assembly, the North and the United States and denounces the Summit's outcome document as "unlawful".

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By Alejandro Kirk

When the Summit outcome document is put to a vote Friday, many of its endorsers will be the same folk who applauded yesterday when President Hugo Chavez denounced it as "unlawful".

The Venezuelan president was in a fiery mood when he arrived to address the General Assembly yesterday and immediately attacked the U.N. and the outcome document.

"This is over. This document, the manner in which it was conceived, its contents, how they are eroding the modest goals of the Millennium, all this shows that at 60, the United Nations system is suffering from terminal cancer," Chávez said.

Three times delegates interrupted Chávez to applaud, especially when he said that the document had been imposed by diktat by the president of the General Assembly, Jan Eliasson, the Swedish ambassador to Washington. Eliasson appeared irritated by the length of Chávez's speech.

At a press conference later, the Venezuelan president said that the United Nations, as it is now, is of no use and will have to be rebuilt from scratch. The document, ostensibly approved by consensus Tuesday, was negotiated by an "elite" group of 30 countries and submitted "five minutes before the session started", he charged.

Chavez noted that before anyone

"No proposal shall be discussed or put to the vote at any meeting of the General Assembly unless copies of it have been circulated to all delegations not later than the day preceding the meetings." (Rule 78 of the General Assembly).

could react, there was the sound of "the dictatorial gavel of the president of the General Assembly".

Given the circumstances of its endorsement, he continued, Venezuela considers the document unlawful and will not recognise it.

To illustrate his contention that the document was illegal under U.N. regulations, he read the text of rule 78/38 of the General Assembly, which states that "no proposal shall be discussed or put to the vote at any meeting of the General Assembly unless copies of it have been circulated to all delegations not later than the day preceding the meetings".

"If others do not wish to complain, well, let them be. But I am complaining, I have a duty to complain," Chávez said, adding that he had support from millions of people around the world in his demands for a more democratic United Nations.

The Latin American leader also denounced the United States for denying visas to his doctors and security officers, who "are stranded in an airplane 200 kilometres" from the U.N. Secretariat. He described the US action of separating him from his medical and security personnel as "terrorism" and went on to brand the United States a "terrorist state" for protecting Cuban native Luis Posada Carriles, accused of masterminding a bomb attack that destroyed a Cuban civilian airplane with 73 passengers on board off the coast of Barbados in 1976.

In his speech before the Assembly Chávez noted that the purpose of the Summit had been "distorted". A "reform process has been imposed, leaving aside the most urgent issue, which is the adoption of measures to confront the real problems that hinder our countries' efforts toward development", he noted.

"Venezuela considers that United Nations reform cannot be limited to a simple cosmetic change of the Security Council, aimed at ensuring the unipolar hegemony of developed countries," he said.

Chávez told journalists that it was time the world admitted that it was not moving towards realising the MDGs, but rather in the opposite direction. He blamed much of this trend on the North, singling out the United States, with its thirst for oil, for special criticism.

"The world cannot afford the 'American Way of Life'," he said, "the planet is dying."

No Free Ride

Join My Delegation, Tout My Views

NGO officials who joined government delegations in order to improve their chances of attending the World Summit find that they are expected to promote government policies, even those they disagree with.

By Arthur Okwemba
African Woman and Child Feature Service

They are used to issuing scathing attacks and strong worded statements against their governments, but at this UN Summit, representatives of civil societies are finding themselves in an awkward position.

Having been included in government delegations, some of them are being assigned duties by their governments, which include presenting the government position in meetings.

"It is just awkward. I cannot pin them down on what they are presenting here as achievements towards the implementation of Millennium Development Goals," a delegate from Kenya expressed her frustration.

Women delegates who have come to the meeting through such means cannot articulate issues of gender empowerment, maternal and child mortality in a more robust way as they would have done if they had come as civil society representatives

She says her inclusion in the government delegation was to help her get accreditation to attend the Summit with ease.

"My believe was once I got here, I will be free to do what I do best. But things are now contrary to what I expected."

Women delegates who have come to the meeting through such means cannot articulate issues of gender empowerment, maternal and child mortality in a more robust way as they would have done if they had come as civil society representatives.

This phenomenon of NGO officials coming as government delegations to the UN or to other multinational institution meetings is rampant among African countries.

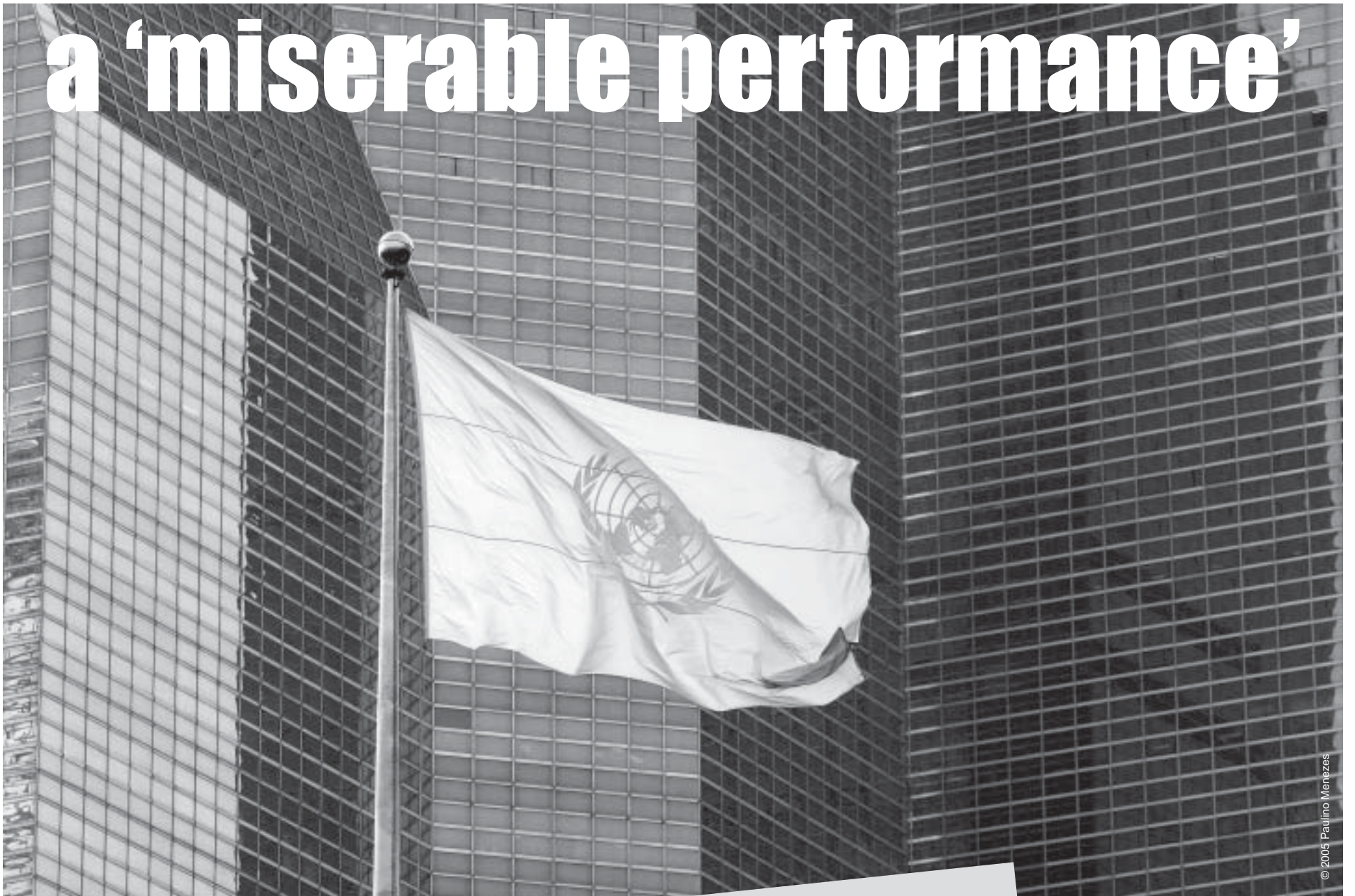
Some of those attending as government delegates see it as a necessary tactic to help them access some closed meetings, influence the course of discussions or feed the outcomes to their colleagues not attending the meeting.

This has worked well and borne fruit in efforts to lobby for certain positions being pushed by the civil society.

But for other NGO officials, they come to UN meetings as government delegates because they are providing expert advice to their countries on certain issues.

Still, this kind of relationship becomes somewhat more interesting, particularly when the NGO officials and their governments do not see eye to eye on an issue.

Mbeki calls for action after a 'miserable performance'



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By Paula Fray

After a full day of self-congratulation and faint praise by world leaders, South African President Thabo Mbeki expressed the views of many when he described efforts to meet the Millennium Development Goals as “half-hearted, timid and tepid”.

“One of the facts that stand out sharply from the review is that in truth we have not made the decisive progress we thought we would make with regard to the critical issue of the reform of the United Nations. We have therefore had no choice but to postpone to a later date the decisions we should have made,” said Mbeki during his address to the General Assembly yesterday,

Mbeki asserted the “only saving

grace with regard to this miserable performance” is that, as it closed, the 59th General Assembly “reaffirmed our commitment to strengthen the United Nations with a view to enhancing its authority and efficiency, as well as its capacity to address effectively... the full range of challenges of our time.”

Mbeki said the review had shown that “our approach to the challenge to commit and deploy the necessary resources for the realisation of the Millennium Development Goals has been half-hearted, timid and tepid”.

South Africa is known to be disenchanted with the U.N. World Summit’s watered-down outcome document. “It is disappointing in many ways,” said South African ambassador to the United Nations Dumisani Khumalo after the day’s negotiations on Tuesday.

Eyes are now turning to the upcoming World Bank and International Monetary Fund annual gen-

The Millennium Review Summit is getting mixed reviews, but all eyes are now on the upcoming multilateral meetings to deliver the impetus needed to keep anti-poverty efforts on track.

eral meeting and the World Trade Organisation (WTO) ministerial talks in Hong Kong in December to deliver the impetus for fighting poverty which the summit has fallen short of delivering.

Speaking at a press conference earlier yesterday, Bob Geldof - who gave the summit a 4/10 mark - said a great leap forward must be implemented at the WTO trade talks in Hong Kong.

Asked to name and shame the countries who were the “spoilers” in the negotiations leading up to the outcome document, Geldof said, “The shame is ours; the name is the world”.

Nigerian President Olusegun Obasanjo described the outcomes as a “qualified success”, saying some of us “expected a little bit more - particularly with the great leap forward we had at Gleneagles”.

British Prime Minister Tony Blair said that debt relief and trade negotiations were among

the milestones needing to be measured now. Pledging to make sure that the December WTO talks would be fruitful, Blair said they needed to ensure “people understand that if we land up with failure in December, it will echo across the world”.

In a statement issued yesterday, Kumi Naidoo, chairperson of the Global Call to Action against Poverty (GCAP) also looked to the upcoming World Bank/IMF meetings.

“With 191 countries endorsing the G8 debt deal at the United Nations this week, it is crucial that the World Bank/IMF hear their collective voice, stop quibbling and cancel the debts of the poorest countries,” said Naidoo.

Newly-appointed African Development Bank president Donald Kaberuka told IPS the summit had shown that there was commitment to the objectives set out in 2000.

“The problems of Africa cannot be solved on the same day - it is a process,” said Kaberuka.

“The mechanisms and implementation have to be worked out by organisations like mine. These mechanisms will be put in place in the coming weeks,” said Kaberuka.

In a statement issued earlier this week, the World Bank announced that the executive directors have discussed the bank’s “Africa Action Plan” to support African countries in their efforts to increase growth, tackle poverty and achieve the MDGs.

“Success in this effort depends both on developed countries and developing countries stepping up to their responsibilities. It is a matter of performance for assistance,” said World Bank President Paul Wolfowitz.

The plan, described as establishing “a framework for using the resources available for 2006-2008 to deliver results in the areas of economic growth, human development and poverty reduction”, will be discussed at the development committee during the World Bank/IMF Annual Meetings.

The Action Plan establishes specific commitments, such as



“Our approach to the challenge to commit and deploy the necessary resources for the realisation of the Millennium Development Goals has been half-hearted, timid and tepid.”

increased financial support for free primary education in 15 countries through the Education for All Fast Track Initiative; increased funding for roads, power and other infrastructure programs from an annual investment of \$1.8 billion to \$2.8 billion in two years; plans for the Bank to expand its Malaria Booster Program by 150 percent in 17 countries; the scaling up of lending support for HIV/Aids programmes in 10 countries, as well as additional investment to ensure the progress required to achieve the gender MDG goal in 10 countries by 2008.

On Wednesday, Professor Leonor Magtolis Briones, submitted a statement to the UN General Assembly on behalf of civil society calling on world leaders to live up to their promises.

“The Millennium Development Goals will not be reached by 2015,” said Briones.

As a consequence of unfulfilled promises, “more than a billion people continue to live in absolute poverty, girl children are not able to go to school, infant mortality rates remain high; mothers still die in childbirth, the HIV pandemic continues to escalate, the environment continues to be devastated, and global issues on trade, debt and ODA remain unresolved,” said Briones.

“This General Assembly is not the time for more promises. It is time to fulfil old and new promises. The poor of the world, especially the women and children, cannot wait until 2015.”

Mbeki said the summit had not made the progress it needed to

make. It had not achieved “a security consensus” because of the widely disparate condition of existence and interest among member states as well as the gross imbalance of power.

“It is the poor of the world whose interests are best served by real and genuine respect for the fundamental proposition that we need the security consensus identified by the outcome document. The actions of the rich and powerful strongly suggest that they are not in the least convinced that this “security consensus” would serve their interests,” said Mbeki.

“Thus they use their power to perpetuate the power imbalance in the ordering of global affairs. As a consequence of this, we have not made the progress of the reform of the UN that we should have. Because of that, we have the result that we have not achieved the required scale of resource transfer from those who have these resources, to empower the poor of the world to extricate themselves from their misery.”

Simply put, said Mbeki, “The logic in the use of power is the reinforcement of the might of the powerful and therefore the perpetuation of the disempowerment of the powerless.

“This is the poisonous mixture that has given us the outcome that will issue from this Millennium Review Summit to the peoples of the world. We should not be surprised when these billions do not acclaim us as heroes and heroines,” said Mbeki.

In a briefing in South Africa prior to the Millennium Review Summit, the South African government expressed its confidence that it would meet the MDGs by 2015, outlining a number of achievements already reached. The briefing noted that measures taken to eradicate poverty included social grants, an expanded public works programme and health initiatives.

Social grants increased from \$1.5 billion in 1994 (2.6 million beneficiaries) to \$5.8 billion (7.9-million beneficiaries) in 2004.

Access to sanitation increased from 49 percent of households in 1994 to 63 percent in 2003, while households with access to clean water increased from 60 percent in 1995 to 85 percent in 2003.

Between April 1994 and March 2005, 2.4 million housing subsidies were approved and 1.74 million housing units built. In the same period, 3.5 million homes were electrified at a rate of over 435 000 homes a year. Enrolment for primary education increased from some 150 000 in 1999, to 280 000 in 2002.

However, concern was expressed about the quality of the baseline data being used as this was from before the advent of democracy.

The Economic Commission for Africa report “*The Millennium Development Goals in Africa: Progress and Challenges*” notes that Africa fared the worst of the world’s regions. “It saw the slowest progress overall and suffered reverses in crucial areas. In sub-Saharan Africa, the number of people living in extreme poverty (on \$US1 a day or less) rose from 217 million in 1990 to 290 million in 2000, the majority of whom are women.”

The report identifies South Africa as on track to halve poverty, achieve universal education, halt and reverse the incidence of tuberculosis and provide safe access to water.

South African civil society response to the government’s review centred on the consultative process. In a summary produced by a range of NGO, union and community organisations, the movement expressed concerns that the MDGs were the barest minimum for a development programme. Noting that civil society had been excluded from the drawing up of the report, they called on the South African government to “establish a broad, truly consultative standing forum with civil society and labour to develop the MDGs further in our country and to allow for the ongoing monitoring of our progress of the goals”.

Looking for a better outcome

By Zarina Geloo

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As the World Summit comes to an end, the Global Call to Action Against Poverty (GCAP) is taking to the streets and raising the volume ahead of the annual IMF and World Bank discussions.

Global activists are continuing their campaign against poverty with a renewed focus on debt cancellation and trade ahead of the critical World Bank and IMF meetings next week.

A Global Call to Action Against Poverty (GCAP) demonstration was scheduled for the streets of New York this morning.

Henry Malumo, Africa media co-ordinator for the Global Campaign Against Poverty (GCAP) says the movement wants these organisations to act on the Gleneagles agreement on debt cancellation.

The U.N. World Summit outcome document does not deal with trade as negotiators referred these issues to the multilaterals organizations dealing with trade.

"We have to make sure that this document is not used in anyway as a reference point. It does nothing to help African countries get rid of or reduce poverty. We should be making sure that the discussions in Washington do not reverse or move away from the gains of Gleneagles."

Malumo's concern is that the U.N. outcomes document does not put a time frame to debt cancellation; does not spell out terms for fair trade and the removal of subsidies and is silent on lending conditionalities which have become a contentious point with borrower nations, usually in the third world.

Addressing the General Assem-



bly on Tuesday, US President George W. Bush called on the two institutions to finalise the "historic agreement as soon as possible".

"If the World Bank and the IMF do not go by the G8 deal that was affirmed at the United Nations Summit, what are the implications?" asked Malumo.

"A reversal in the debt deal would be a total disaster for millions of people worldwide who have over the years lobbied their governments and the G8 to cancel the impoverishing and huge debt of poor nations. In addition, any decisions counter to Gleneagles will mean a complete reverse of the little progress already," said Malumo.

GCAP chairperson Kumi Naidoo said it is obvious that the UN has not listened to the voice of underdeveloped countries and has shown a lack of commitment and political will to help reduce world poverty.



Henry Malumo, Africa media co-ordinator for the Global Campaign Against Poverty (GCAP)

"There are too many inconsistencies. We are tired of commitments being made at summits and then being ignored in the final documents. There is nothing of substance in this document and we are saying so in a very visible way."

He says the UN summit was supposed to review the MDGs and assess failures and successes, but this had not been done. "The powerful states do not want to

admit failures; like the first target which is gender parity with a deadline for 2005. All we did is what the northern states wanted us to do - which is legitimise their agenda by seeming to acquiesce with it," said Naidoo.

African representatives, who did not want to be named, agreed the outcome document was lacking. Delegates from Kenya said the document had very little African input because of the way

the process was structured.

Rwandan delegate Bashia Habriyama said the limited African representation on the core group meant that African leaders were still studying the final document and therefore could not discuss the merits or demerits of it.

"It is difficult for most African leaders to talk about the outcome document because they do not understand what it is about. Of course the realisation will only come when they get home and by then it will be too late to do anything about it," said Habriyama.

But a Nigerian diplomat was more magnanimous. "Both sides got what they could get; neither one got what they wanted completely. The first step is that the document was produced. Now that we have that, we can ask for more as the opportunities present themselves."



The “Friends” of the Process are Algeria, Brazil, Canada, Egypt, Hungary, India, Malaysia, Mexico, South Africa, Spain, Thailand, and the United Kingdom.

Two years ago the Helsinki Process on Globalisation and Democracy was launched in the hope that it might help to bridge the gap between North and South and bring together all the different stakeholders who, from their respective positions, face the challenges of globalisation.

The process was inspired by the first Helsinki Process, which was instrumental in ending the Cold War and lead to a dismantling of the barriers between East and West.

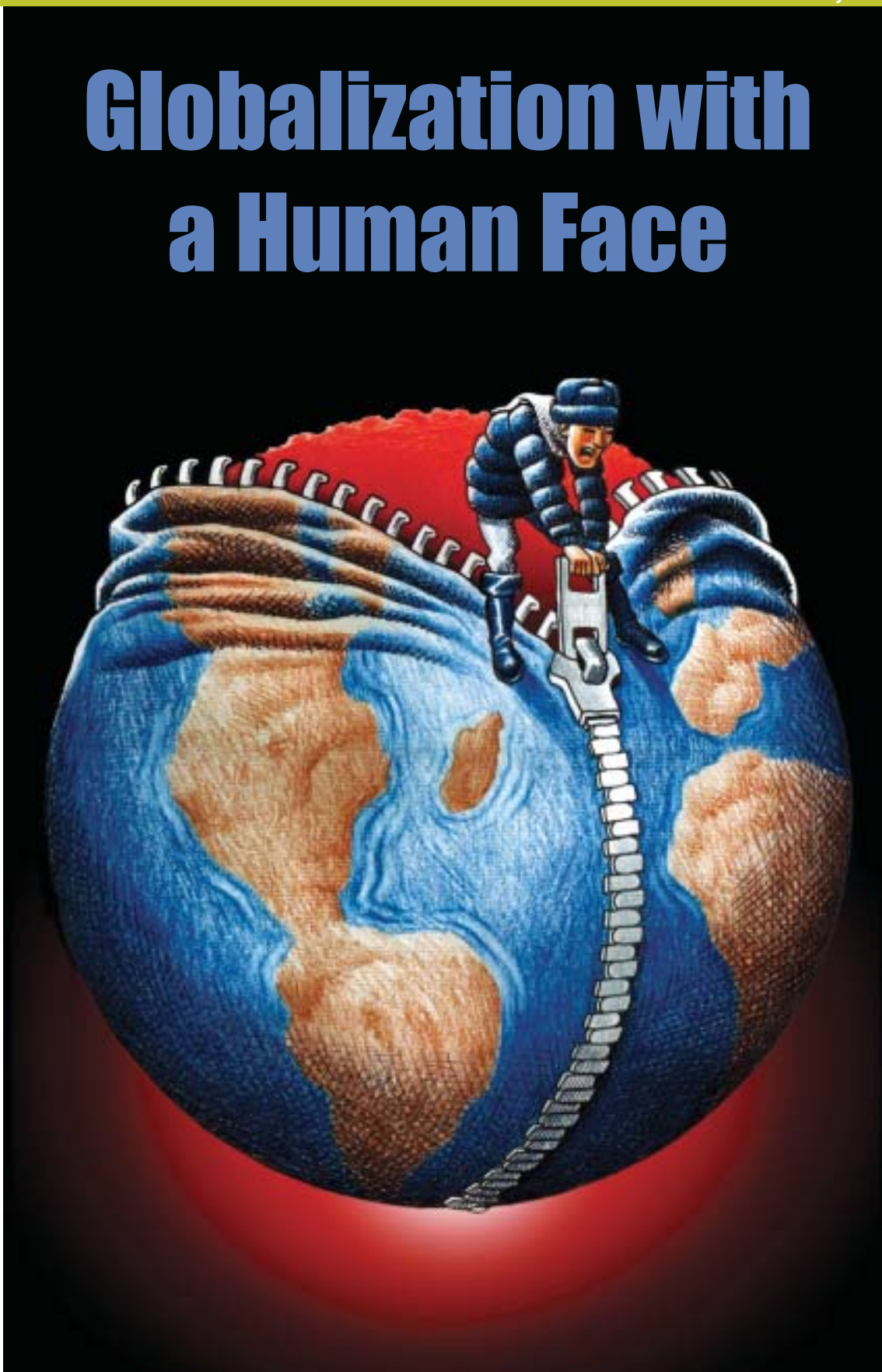
The Helsinki Conference of 7-9 September, entitled “Mobilising Political Will”, is the culmination of the new process as well as a kind of trial run for the Round Table method recommended by the Helsinki Group.

The premise of the Helsinki Process is that the cross-border nature of globalisation also calls for cross-border governance involving different stakeholders - governments, civil society organisations, business actors, international organisations, academics, and the media.

The possibilities provided by globalisation are self-evident, but we must be able to find more effective means to control and direct it in order to ensure that its advantages are spread more evenly at the domestic as well as international levels. We have no global government nor does it seem like a realistic endeavour to create one, which means that the methods for governing globalisation must be founded on different grounds.

We believe that different stakeholders all have an important role to play in solving global problems and in realising commitments already made. Governments can agree on norms and legal frameworks, business actors often have the technical solutions and know-how to address the problems efficiently, and civil society typically

Globalization with a Human Face



has the ability to mobilise awareness and political will for tackling the problems. Together these stakeholders could have a great impact on establishing a joint global agenda and on implementing it. These different stakeholders need not necessarily reach consensus on all details in order to be able to work together; their focus has to be on finding common solutions to urgent problems instead of assigning blame.

The greatest benefit of the multi-stakeholder concept presented by the Helsinki Group is that it 1) combines the strengths of different stakeholder groups, thus also

broadening ownership and commitment; 2) allows us to move beyond dead-lock situations by focusing on practical steps forward rather than on assigning blame; 3) can be applied to solve specific problems, to focus on the division of roles between different actors, as well as to address wider issues to build trust and common understanding between actors with even radically different and diverse views. In short, it is action-oriented, inclusive, and empowering.

At present, particular attention needs to be paid to identifying partners, potential coalitions, and alliances for these kinds of pro-

cesses to be successful. On the other hand, it is necessary to feed the results of our work into existing international organisations in order to provide a framework for implementing them.

The Helsinki Group calls for a continued process of bringing different stakeholders and processes together to strengthen and coordinate efforts for global change. As a practical measure, the Helsinki Group suggests the formation of global Round Tables aiming at identifying possibilities for improvement in several areas, including poverty and development, human rights, environment,

governance, and peace and security — themes similar to those of the Millennium Declaration. These Round Tables would be challenged with demonstrating the effectiveness of the Helsinki Process multi-stakeholder concept in generating concrete multi-stakeholder action through open and inclusive dialogue.

Although multi-stakeholder cooperation in global problem-solving is the key message of the Helsinki Process, it is clear that governments should bear the main responsibility for implementing any of the proposals made by the Process. With this in mind, Finland and Tanzania have already approached a group of selected governments, the so-called “Friends of the Helsinki Process”, with the results of the Process as well as plans for future work.

These “Friends” — Algeria, Brazil, Canada, Egypt, Hungary, India, Malaysia, Mexico, South Africa, Spain, Thailand, and the United Kingdom — have been closely following the work of the Helsinki Process. At this meeting we hope to agree on joint action for further addressing these issues, which require urgent action, would benefit from multi-stakeholder cooperation, and are politically feasible, technically doable, and have global reach.

Our intention is to offer the results of the Helsinki Process to the consideration of the international community for building mutual trust between all stakeholders. The international community does not lack proposals for solving many of the problems we face; most often what is lacking is the political will to commit resources to implement them. We believe that by building trust at the international level we can build momentum for jointly realising the common goals we have committed ourselves to.

(*) Erkki Tuomioja is Minister for Foreign Affairs of Finland.
Jakaya M. Kikwete is Minister for Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation of Tanzania.

In an interview with IPS, Evelyne Herfkens, the U.N. Secretary General's Executive Coordinator for the Millennium Development Goals Campaign, says that though progress has been slow, the goals are achievable by 2015.

Banking on People Power

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By Qurratul-Ain-Tahmina

Q. What is your assessment of the outcome document in terms of MDGs?

A. Let me first say that it is, of course, good news that world leaders have reconfirmed their commitment to the millennium development goals after all. Last week or so we were not sure that that would even happen. Secondly, this document also codifies the commitment of those countries who have committed themselves to the 0.7 percent (of GNP for overseas development aid). That means every country in the world, except the United States, has committed to finally set a deadline for achieving that aid target. I also think the document is fairly good on the need for developing countries to be accountable to their people, which is a crucial issue if you want to achieve the MDGs.

On the negative side, the most disappointing thing is that countries have insisted that they don't want to see anything about trade in the United Nations - that the debate is in the World Trade Organisation. I find it weird - if we have heads of states here, they can overrule their own trade min-



isters! And particularly on the issues of agricultural subsidies that destroy markets that poor families depend on, I really had hoped that it would be possible to - at least - repeat some of the commitments that have been made elsewhere. Even that has not been the case.

Secondly, the whole debate about developing countries within the trading system needing policy space to support their own rural development has not been reflected in the document either. So, that is disappointing.

On the other hand, I say all the time this is just yet another government negotiated U.N. document, which by definition reflects the common lowest denominator. What I find most interesting is to then hear national speeches where countries actually raise the bar and promise to do more than is actually reflected in this negotiated outcome document.

Q. Are the countries pledging more?

A. Some are, some are not. I know for instance that there will be a far reaching statement by the group of countries which has already achieved 0.7 percent aid

commitment. And the Swedes will promise to achieve 1 percent in 2006. By the way, this is not just about aid. This is also the first U.N. document that reflects concrete commitments from donor countries to improve the quality of aid. And, as a lot of aid is not helping to reduce poverty, it is very important that we not only look at the bulk of money on the table, but where it is actually spent.

Q. What of individual donors, the U.S. for example?

A. Well, again, I am absolutely very glad that I saw President Bush standing there re-supporting the MDGs, period. There was no comma, no qualification. And he promised a few more initiatives, which I have to study to assess to what extent it really means additionality.

In terms of aid, President Bush repeated his commitment which he made at Monterrey. But that commitment has not yet been fully realised either. So the issue is very much: the U.S. has not promised the 0.7, but it did promise additional aid in Monterrey. It did promise to do more in sub-Saharan Africa; it did say time and time again that each of these promises were additional to earlier ones. But until now, the figures haven't added up and the interesting thing is what's going to happen now.

Q. Does the summit make you hopeful about the fate of the MDGs?

A. Well, I have always said that the goals will not be achieved at the United Nations. The U.N. can provide a forum where government leaders can make promises, but the U.N. cannot send the police if countries then don't fulfil their promises. Only the citizens and the parliaments of countries concerned can remind their governments and hold them to account for promises they made.

I believe that if citizens mobilise and show their governments you can win votes, not



“I am convinced that what this shows is that if citizens mobilise in sufficient numbers to hold their governments to account then we can achieve these goals”.

lose them, if you actually fulfil these promises, that governments will act.

And I think the revolutionary commitment of the European Union to finally have a deadline – finally after all these decades – to achieve the 0.7, has everything to do with a degree of mobilisation all across Europe, including in southern Europe where it was never strong before, to get these governments to promise that. I am convinced that what this shows is that if citizens mobilise in sufficient numbers to hold their governments to account then we can achieve these goals.

Q. What does it mean that the U.S. has not yet set any such deadline?

A. No, it has not. But there are also not many U.S. citizens demonstrating for that. If you walk around the U.S. you see that people indeed mobilise for different issues, but world poverty is not as high on the political

agenda here, as in many other rich countries.

Q. Has poverty actually gotten more acute in places?

A. In some places, yes. There has been progress in some places, but not in others. On an average, there has been progress but it's patchy – and it is too slow for the MDGs to be achieved.

Q. Do you see any need to extend the 2015 deadline?

A. I don't think we should do that. It's way too early that we say okay, we are going to give up, because we still have 10 years to go. It's late, but not too late. We can still do it. Even some of the poorest countries are on track to achieve the education goal. Some of the poorest countries, like Senegal and Uganda, have already achieved goals. Vietnam surpassed the poverty goal some time ago and is raising the bar.

So if some of these poorest countries can achieve some of the

goals, then I don't want to give up. And whenever countries are on track it is a combination of them living up to their promises, by improving their policies in the sectors, and, in the case of poor countries the international community being relatively generous with aid and debt relief. Like in Tanzania, thanks to the Jubilee Movement a million kids go to school today.

But what they show is that if both parties live up to their promises — poor countries to improve governance, be accountable to their people, set priorities, make policies pro-poor, and rich countries be more generous, make aid effective, give more debt relief, and I hope this year finally also set a deadline for elimination of agricultural subsidies that destroy markets where poor farmers depend on — then I think the world can still achieve these goals. We have seen a lot of mobilisation already going on – the white-band movement is really big — to re-

mind their governments of these promises. Citizen's mobilisation is critically important. I have been a politician myself. If you hear from your electorate often enough, you better act – you gonna act.

Q. How important is aid to development?

A. In most countries it's much more important how you spend your own public money; what your own priorities are. If the right priorities are set to achieve these goals, then additional goals help with the speed of achievements. Aid should never be defining, but it should be home-grown programmes.

Q. Do you agree with the criticism that negotiations for the summit document did not take into account civil society participation?

A. That's the formal process in New York. But I find the formal process in New York much less inspiring than what's actually going on on the ground. The goals are global goals and they should stay global. Country after country has to adopt and adapt these goals to its own situation, its own challenges and its own opportunities. And that is the real world and the real world is not a meeting in New York. So this whole negotiations and documents, it's nice that it codifies some improvements, but it's more important that citizens mobilise to get implementation of promises than having yet another round of promises here.

Q. There has been strong criticism that the dominant policy of market economy is not going to achieve the goals?

A. I come from Europe where we found a nice combination between market economy and social economy. And I think, country after country has to find a balance between public responsibilities and private sector participation. People have to find for themselves what works for their societies.

U.N. Reform has Long Pedigree

Or a United Nations official to discuss reform of the international system is rather like an Englishman talking about the weather — we do it all the time, it is a staple of daily conversation, but it seems that real change is always a little over the horizon.

In fact, United Nations reform has a long pedigree. The UN was founded in 1945, and the first discussions of reform began in 1948. And these discussions have continued in fits and starts ever since.

When Kofi Annan was elected SG in 1997 he embarked upon a major process of reform that was widely applauded within the UN Secretariat and by Member States. But at the time he was wise enough to say that “reform is a process, not an event”.

Ambassadors in New York have hammered out the details of the current reform proposals. But whatever they manage to agree upon, as a long-time U.N. official I am conscious of how much the United Nations has already changed since I joined it 27 years ago.

If I had suggested to my seniors at that time that the U.N. would one day observe and even run elections in sovereign states, conduct intrusive inspections for weapons of mass destruction, impose comprehensive sanctions on the entire import-export trade of a Member State, or set up international criminal tribunals and coerce governments into handing over their citizens to be tried by foreigners under international law, I am sure they would have told me that I did not understand what the United Nations was all about.

And yet the U.N. has done every one of those things and more, during the last two decades.

Today’s reform imperatives can be traced back to the divisions over the Iraq war. In the summer of 2003, a poll conducted by the



The Goals will only be met if individual countries implement what they have promised and go beyond the minimal international consensus wherever possible. One country that has done this is Sweden, which will provide 1% of GNI in official development assistance next year.

Pew Organisation in 20 countries around the world revealed that the U.N.’s standing had gone down in all 20. It had gone down in the U.S. because the U.N. did not agree to support the U.S. administration on the war, but it had also gone down in the 19 other countries, because the U.N. was unable to prevent the war. Some famous and rather powerful voices began to speak of the U.N.’s irrelevance.

It was at the peak of this intense scrutiny that Secretary-General Annan seized the moment.

In a speech to the General Assembly, he said that we had come to a fork in the road: we could either continue with business as usual, which could lead us to disaster, or we could review the entire architecture of the international system that had been built up since 1945, and build a more effective house of global gover-

nance for the 21st century.

He named a High-Level Panel of eminent persons to look into issues of peace and security, while a parallel group of economists studied what the world needed to do to fulfil the commitments made on development by world leaders at the Millennium Summit in 2000. In March, their key recommendations were synthesized in a report titled *In Larger Freedom*.

The title comes from the preamble to the U.N. charter, which speaks of the U.N. striving “to promote social progress and better standards of life in larger freedom”. By that phrase our founders implied both that development is possible only in conditions of freedom, and that people can only benefit from political freedom when they have at least a fair chance of reaching decent living standards.

Of course, the U.N. often falls short of its noble aspirations, since it reflects the realities of world politics, even while seeking to transcend them. The U.N. at its best and its worst, is a mirror of the world: it reflects our differences and our convergences, our hopes and aspirations as well as our limitations and failures.

As we face these new challenges of our time, let us not forget the old ones — especially the persistent horror of underdevelopment. The combination of poverty, drought, famine and HIV/AIDS in sub-Saharan Africa threatens more human lives than terrorism or the tsunami ever did. This summit must reaffirm the Millennium Development Goals and recommit the world to achieving these targets by 2015. All governments must be accountable for fulfilling their part of the bargain, both to their own peoples and to each other. There is no longer any excuse for leaving well over a billion of our fellow human beings in abject misery.

The U.N. is a forum where sovereign states can work out common strategies for tackling global problems, and an instrument for putting those strategies into effect. But it can be a much more effective instrument if its Member States in the General Assembly and the Security Council are better organised and give clearer directives to us in the Secretariat, along with the flexibility to carry them out, and then holds us clearly accountable for how we do it.

Ecuador puts Convention into play

Corrupt? Who, me?

Millennium Development Goals are unreachable without a commitment to fighting corruption in both rich and poor countries.

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By L.A. Nguyen

Antonio María Costa, head of the UN Office on Drugs and Crime, was a happy man yesterday. With Ecuador's ratification of the Convention Against Corruption, his agency has finally come into its own.

"The thirtieth ratification of the Convention against Corruption is a victory for millions of ordinary citizens", said Costa, who is Italian and therefore has an idea of what this issue means. Africa was particularly set to benefit from the new rules, he said.

"Imagine a situation wherein recovered funds in African states could be redeployed and used for development. It's an ingenious solution to underdevelopment, and a win-win for everyone involved."

International non-governmental organisations (NGOs) are urging governments to fight corruption in order to achieve the UN Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).

At the Summit, NGOs noted that corruption is a global phenomenon and that limiting its reach is the responsibility of poor and wealthy nations alike.

"This is a huge problem - not just in developing countries," said Sonia Correa, a research expert with Development Alternatives with Women for a New Area (DAWN.) "Even developed countries like the U.S. or those in Europe are not exempted. We need to change the common sense that this is the business of the Third World countries, not the rich countries."

Although fighting corruption and improving governance is highlighted in the Summit's outcome document, activists warned that it would take strong commitment from state leaders to realise the MDGs.

"We are glad that the outcome document actually has a quite significant section on governance and corruption," said Salil Shetty, Director of the UN Millennium Campaign. "Developing countries should focus on improving



Antonio Maria Costa

governance to make sure that resources reach the people."

Transparency International, a global watchdog against corruption, said that there will be no fair world and no abolition of extreme poverty as long as corruption undermines education, health, trade and the environment.

"Corruption is a massive drag on efforts to reach the Millennium Development Goals. It means wasted money, time, and ultimately, lives," said its Chief Executive David Nussbaum in a statement. "Governments, especially those of the G8, need to move beyond paying lip service to the principles of accountability and transparency if they are determined to improve the lives of millions who live in poverty and instability."

Research conducted by Transparency International has demonstrated that corruption hampers economic growth, keeps countries from capitalising on internal resources and reduces aid effectiveness, contributing significantly to hunger and malnutrition. Petty bribery hits the poor hardest, ensuring that they stay poor.

The World Bank estimates that the total volume of bribes paid annually is \$1 trillion, nearly twice the gross domestic product of Africa. Often, the blame falls on those who take the bribes rather than those who pay the bribes.

Misallocation of education resources means that schools are never built and that education systems remain drastically under-resourced. Corrupt education officials at all levels have often been found to abuse their position as gate-keepers, making good education dependent on capacity to pay bribes.

According to CIET International, 86 percent of parents polled in Nicaragua reported paying mandatory "contributions" to teachers. Of the 47 percent of girls who managed to get into primary school in one Pakistani province, nearly all reported unofficial demands for money.

"By and large, public funds and social policy are vulnerable to corruption because the lack of a transparency mechanism," Correa said.

Misallocation also means that hospitals are poorly staffed and

The World Bank estimates that the total volume of bribes paid annually is \$1 trillion, nearly twice the gross domestic product of Africa. Often, the blame falls on those who take the bribe, rather than those you pay it.

resourced. Corruption in public healthcare systems even results in fake drugs and bribes are often a prerequisite for access to healthcare, including maternal health.

Transparency International reports that the average maternity ward patient in Bangalore pays approximately \$22 in bribes to receive adequate medical care. In Nigeria, there have been countless deaths due to counterfeit medications that move unhindered from production plants, across national borders and into unsuspecting markets.

Corrupt public officials mean that the environmental regulations remain unenforceable, resulting in

lost livelihoods, illness and social displacement for millions. Corruption also means greater business risks as it distorts markets, discourages foreign direct investment, and stifles cross-border trade.

"Corruption has become very ingrained into society," said Correa. "The whole corruption climate in some countries is contaminating individuals at every level."

NGOs, however, acknowledged that the discussion on fighting corruption has become much more relevant in the last few years as many governments have upped their commitment to stamping it out.

The 'Final Battle' for Gay and Lesbian Rights

By Marcela Valente/IPS

The Argentinian congress is likely to pass a bill considered to be more progressive than the same-sex marriage law adopted in Spain last June.

By drawing the media spotlight to five-year-old twins Lucas and Julia and their two "daddies", the Argentine gay and lesbian community is gearing up to fight for the passage of a bill in Congress that would not only legalise same-sex civil unions, but grant these couples the inheritance and adoption rights normally limited to marriage.

If it is passed into law this month, Argentina will become the first country in Latin America to legally recognise homosexual couples nationwide.

Same-sex civil unions are currently authorised in the city of Buenos Aires, but these partnerships do not include the right for one spouse to automatically inherit from the other, nor do they permit adopting children as a couple.

The civil union bill, which is backed by numerous jurists, is considered to be more progressive than the same-sex marriage law adopted in Spain last June. Instead of merely expanding the legal concept of marriage to include same-sex couples, the proposed legislation would establish a new, more open institution that some heterosexual couples may choose to opt for as well.

The marriage law currently in force in Argentina contains over 300 articles regulating this legal institution, while the civil union draft law contains less than 160, because it has been designed as an institution that more fully respects the right of every couple to voluntarily adopt its own decisions, explained Marcelo Suntheim, secretary of the Argentine Homosexual Community (CHA).

Essentially, civil unions will allow couples to enjoy all of the benefits of marriage without being subjected to all of its rules, Marcelo Suntheim, secretary of the Argentine Homosexual Community (CHA) said.

For example, he noted, "In a

civil union, adultery doesn't exist, because faithfulness is not an obligation." In order to dissolve the union, all that is required is for one of the partners to declare their wish to do so to the civil registry.

In order to gauge the public's reaction to the bill, the CHA convinced Martín Farach and Andrew Colton, a gay couple, to appear before the media with their five-year-old twins, Lucas and Julia.

"We're just a regular, boring family like any other," maintained Farach, an Argentine who moved abroad with his family after the military coup led by General Juan Carlos Onganía in 1966.

Farach met Colton, who is from the United States, 19 years ago. They got married in Canada, and divide their time between living in the United States and Argentina. They became fathers five years ago with the help of a female friend, who was impregnated with sperm provided by one of them.

"Our families have to be made more visible, because otherwise we will just be engaging in abstract discussions," said Suntheim.

He stressed that there are hundreds of gay and lesbian couples who have been raising children together for many years in Argentina, but the issue has been kept relatively hidden until now.

The strategy of presenting the Farach-Colton family to the media, and therefore to the public, was aimed at highlighting "family diversity" and raising awareness before the bill is submitted to Congress.

There are many lesbian couples who are raising children born to one of the partners during a prior heterosexual relationship. Other lesbian couples turn to donated sperm and artificial insemination as a means of having a baby together.

At the same time, Argentine law allows single men and women to adopt children, and the authorities have even permitted adoption by



Family photo: the first gay marriage in Northampton, Massachusetts, May 2004.

While all children have certain needs that are met by functions which society has classified as "maternal" and "paternal", these functions are not necessarily tied to any given gender or sexual orientation.

first and still the only city in Latin America to grant this right.

Around 350 same-sex couples have officially entered into civil unions since this municipal regulation was approved on May 20, 2003, but these couples do not have the right to adopt children or to automatically inherit from a deceased "spouse", since matters like these can only be addressed by federal law.

While all children have certain needs that are met by functions which society has classified as "maternal" and "paternal", these functions are not necessarily tied to any given gender or sexual orientation, and both roles can in fact be fulfilled by the same person, or shared between two people of the same sex, he explained.

The association is expecting a repeat of the heated debate unleashed by the authorisation of same-sex civil unions in Buenos Aires, including the fierce opposition put forward by conservative right-wing groups and the Catholic Church.

individuals who are members of a same-sex couple who have not attempted to hide this fact.

"It's not that we can't have children. The problem is that these children don't have the same rights as others. If the legal parent dies, the children could end up in an orphanage, even though they have another parent," stressed Suntheim.

Same-sex couples also confront inequality when one of them dies. It is almost impossible for the surviving partner to collect the pension of his or her deceased "spouse", and only on rare occasions does the law recognise same-sex partners as

automatic heirs.

The civil union draft law seeks to fill this legal void, and even offers alternatives. Suntheim believes that even many heterosexual couples will choose a more open form of legal union, with fewer rules and regulations than conventional marriage.

In the 1990s, the efforts of the Argentine gay and lesbian community focused on fighting discrimination, but today they are working to demand full respect for their civil rights.

Their first victory came in 2003, with the legalisation of same-sex civil unions in Buenos Aires, the

World leaders have vague agendas

By Nicola Spurr

Very few of the speakers at the General Assembly this week have made specific mention of women's equality and empowerment.

Most world leaders have drawn the broadest possible brushstrokes in their addresses to the UN General Assembly at the World Summit and none but a handful has explicitly mentioned women's empowerment.

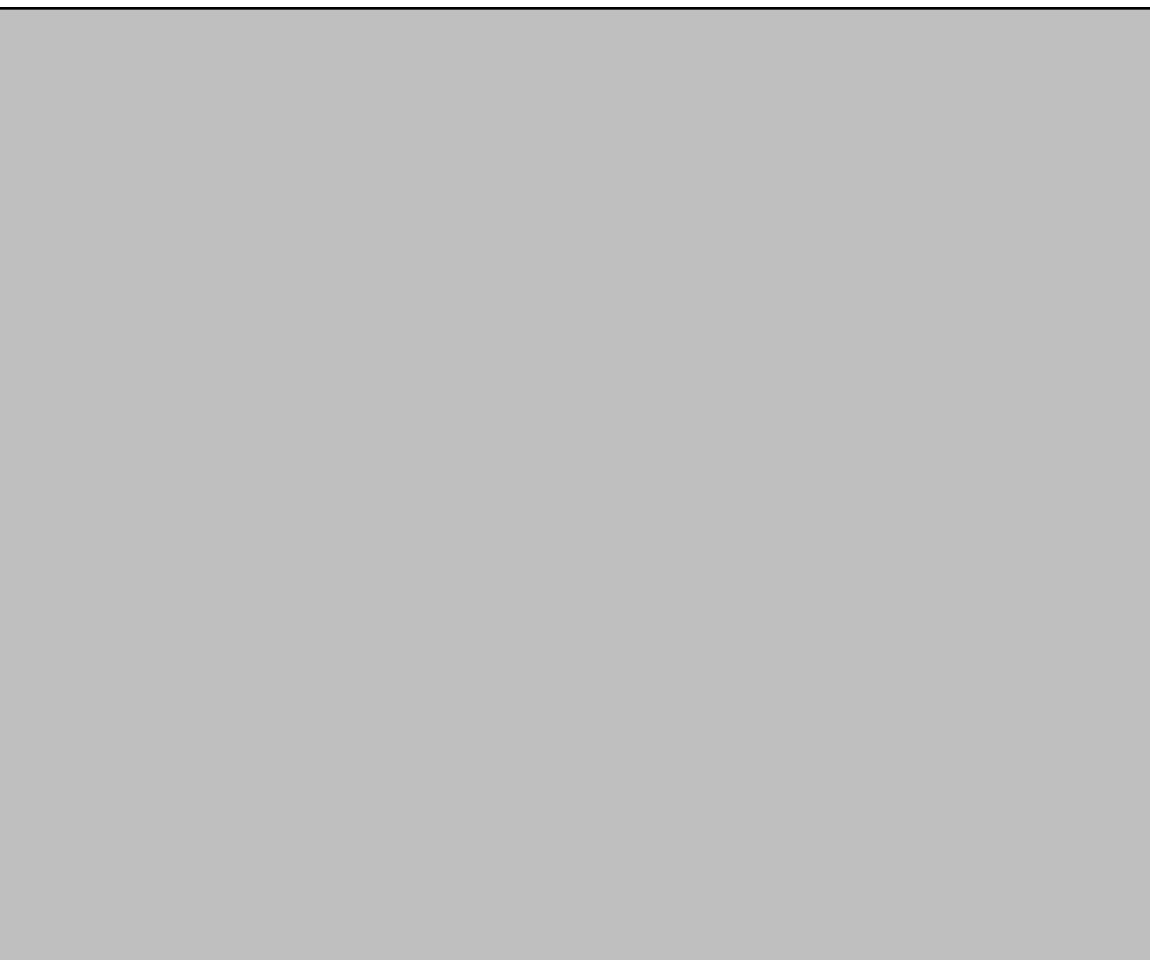
"We have been disappointed that so few presidents have mentioned gender equality," Charlotte Brunch, Executive Director of the Centre for Women's Global Leadership told IPS.

In those addresses where women were specifically mentioned, this was usually in the broadest terms. For example, Chinese President, Hu Jintao did not make any precise commitments when he stated: "We should actively promote and protect human rights, make universal education available, achieve gender equality, upgrade public health capacity building and ensure the enjoyment of equal right[s] and opportunity to all-round development by all."

Several leaders referred to their commitment to achieve gender equality in the context of efforts to increase access to universal primary education for girls. This is one of the Millennium Development Goal (MDG) targets that several countries are proudly proclaiming as success stories.

One of these was Begum Khaleda Zia, Bangladeshi Prime Minister, who said, "We have achieved gender parity in enrolment at the primary and lower secondary levels."

Ismail Omar Guelleh, President of Djibouti said, "My country, as a matter of principle and major policy objective, has pursued and supported since independence an inclusive egalitarian society, in particular equal opportunity for boys and girls; ensuring universal primary education for all."



What these statements gloss over, though, is that a larger number of countries have failed to ensure that young women complete secondary levels of education too. There is evidence to show that many girls simply drop out of school before finishing, due to prohibitively high school fees, gender discrimination and risks of sexual harassment.

According to the UN Millennium Project's task force on gender and education, secondary and higher education are important factors in achieving women's empowerment. Essentially, women who graduate from high school are likely to earn more, have more authority in their families and better control over their fertility. Countries will need to take the next step in ensuring that their female citizens are better educated if they wish to reach the goal of empowerment for women.

United States President George W. Bush surprised many delegates and civil society watchers at the summit by explicitly articulating his country's commitment to the MDGs. "This is an ambitious agenda that includes cutting poverty and hunger in half, ensuring that every boy and girl in the world has access to primary education, and halting the spread of AIDS — all by 2015," he said in his address. He did not, however, take a further step to elaborate how these goals were to be achieved.

There were some missed opportunities for world leaders to proclaim more concrete steps towards achieving the goal of gender equality. There was no mention of specific gender-related issues such as property and inheritance rights for women,

gender inequalities in employment and wages, or increasing political representation for women, for example.

Violence against women and girls also received no attention, except from Ghanaian President John Kufuor who alluded to the more than 20 million victims of illicit arms and light weapons in Africa, many of whom are women and children. These "constitute the weapons of mass destruction" in Africa, he stated.

Only Gambian President Yahya AJJ Jammeh mentioned reproductive rights in his address, saying, "We recognise that universal access to sexual and reproductive health and the protection of reproductive rights are critical in achieving the MDGs."

Women's organisations are critical of the summit's outcome

document for its language on reproductive rights for women. The document commits governments to ensuring equal access to reproductive health for women, but omits specific mention of reproductive rights, a politically sensitive issue - given the US government's increasingly conservative stance.

Although the document fails to guarantee sexual and reproductive rights for women, "it's not missing completely," says Bunch. "Instead, the document re-affirms the agreements of the previous resolutions of the Cairo and Beijing conferences."

Sexual and reproductive rights are considered key in redressing high rates of maternal mortality and sexually transmitted diseases such as HIV/AIDS. The World Health Organisation has found that up to a quarter of married women in sub-Saharan Africa are unable to access contraception. This region bears the brunt of the global HIV/AIDS pandemic and more than half of these are women, according to the International Women's Health Coalition (IWHC).

The IWHC also reports that about half a million women die in childbirth and nearly 70 000 die during unsafe abortions each year.

Women's groups are relatively happy with the gains for women at the World Summit so far. Bunch commented, "It's been a successful week and a successful process for women, within its limitations."

Bunch continued saying, "However, the language of the [outcome] document remains weak on poverty, disarmament and the environment, and we share those losses as part of the larger public."

"It's really a case of the glass half full and half empty."

Women are Naturals at Grassroots Governance

By Nitin Jugran Bahuguna/IPS

The return to panchayats, for centuries the basic units of governance in India, has brought also empowerment for women, who now hold one third of all elected seats in 250,000 local bodies.

The picturesque Himalayan state of Uttaranchal is leading the rest of the country in taking advantage of legislation that reserves a third of all elected seats in local bodies for women.

No longer satisfied with playing second fiddle in local leadership, women in this state now occupy a full 45 percent of seats in its panchayats (rural local bodies).

“Our aim is to raise women’s representation even further to 50 percent in the next five-yearly round of elections in 2008,” said Gitanjali, a trainer at the Rural Litigation and Empowerment Kendra, a non-governmental organisation that works with communities in Uttaranchal - and trains women who are leaders in local government.

For centuries, panchayats formed the basic units of governance across the sub-continent, but their importance was undermined by centralised rule brought in during the British colonial period that ended with independence in 1947.

Influential leaders, especially Mahatma Gandhi, ensured that panchayats had a key role in the constitution drawn up for the new country, but the competitive party-based politics that followed restricted their influence until 1993, when the 73rd amendment restored rural local bodies to their intended place.

Described as a “revolution based on maximum democracy and maximum devolution”, a key feature of the amendment was that 33 percent of elected seats were reserved for women in some 250,000 local government bodies that function below the district level.

Seen another way, this quota meant the empowerment of one million women - as India’s panchayats are run by three million elected office bearers. In Uttaranchal state, of the 6,925 panchayat presidents 2,511 are women.

Uttaranchal was only created in 2000. It was hived off from the



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larger Uttar Pradesh state, still India’s largest and most populous region with a population of 170 million people.

Women played a key role in the struggle to create Uttaranchal, with busloads of them driving down to the national capital of New Delhi to stage demonstrations and highlight the geographical and even ethnic distinctions that could be addressed only through separate statehood within the Indian federation.

The next step was to dismantle the old trappings of centralised rule from Lucknow, the capital of Uttar Pradesh - in many ways more distant than New Delhi, and also more corrupt.

For Sarla Devi, pradhan (president) of the Prithvipur panchayat, that meant encouraging people to turn to panchayats for solutions to their problems, rather than the often corrupt police.

To bring about this shift, she passed a resolution putting an end to police interference in local disputes and issues unless this was approved by the panchayat.

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In the five years that women have been in local government, the biggest challenge they faced was in taking on an entrenched system of “commissions” paid to various government officials — something that depleted funds which had been allocated for welfare activities.

Maina Devi, pradhan of Dhulkot in Dehradun District, said she had also encountered problems with paying daily wages to labourers under government schemes: “The pradhans were allocated roughly one U.S. dollar to be paid each labourer when even the law had fixed the minimum daily wage for unskilled labour at

about two U.S. dollars. It became impossible to find labourers.”

This led to a sense of disillusionment and helplessness among the elected representatives and restricted their ability to work effectively. Gayatri Bhatt, pradhan of Sitabpur in Pauri District, said panchayat leaders had little real power in key areas, as this remained in the hands of other government officials because of bureaucracy.

Academic assessments of women panchayat leaders nationwide conducted by the Women’s Studies Centre at Delhi University corroborate field reports that corruption at the local level has lessened considerably because of

the presence of female pradhans.

This is despite the fact that the patriarchal underpinnings of Indian society have also worked to undermine women’s empowerment, through the phenomenon of the ‘pradhan pati’ (the husband of the panchayat president) abusing his wife’s position. This has opened the door to irregularities and corruption.

“When people have chosen women as their representatives, it is their (women leaders’) duty to carry out their work on their own without interference from male relatives,” said Kamla Bamola, pradhan of the Subash Nagar panchayat near the town of Haridwar.

In Uttaranchal, women’s organisations known as Self Help Groups (SHGs) have helped women overcome corruption and patriarchy. These groups work alongside panchayats, and in some cases even overshadow the elected local bodies.

For example, at Naitri village, close to the Tibetan border, the women’s SHG is now busy building up the panchayat house after collecting money to acquire the land. Men in the village objected to the building which, to them, appeared to entrench the new power of women — but they were easily ignored.

“The SHGs have done more than anything else to further the aim of achieving gender equality as outlined under the Millennium Development Goals,” said Chhaya Kunwar, senior coordinator of the Himalayan Action Research Centre (HARC): an NGO which focuses on women’s empowerment in Uttaranchal.

Over the past three years, HARC has facilitated the creation of 182 SHGs in Uttarkashi district in which Naitri falls, and Chaya believes they have been instrumental in achieving progress towards the MDGs — especially those related to achieving universal primary education, and poverty alleviation.

Poverty Is Not a Statistic

By a different yardstick, the world's poor are 500 million more than the 1.3 billion the World Bank estimates. The term poverty does not mean the same everywhere, but is always more than just income, Social Watch says.

By Diana Cariboni/IPS

Fighting poverty requires, among other things, tools for measuring the phenomenon in all its complexity.

Poverty cannot be defined by having an income of one or two dollars a day, nor is there any advantage in distinguishing the very poor from the “almost” very poor, says the annual report by Social Watch, a global coalition of around 400 citizens’ groups and non-governmental organisations from more than 50 countries.

Although poverty basically reflects drastically unequal distribution of income, it also involves unequal access to goods, job opportunities, information and social services and reduced participation in society, says the Social Watch Report 2005, titled “Roars and Whispers. Gender and Poverty: Promises vs. Action”, released Wednesday in New York.

“The criterion of less than one dollar a day was established by the World Bank as the so-called international extreme poverty line,” says the report, which presents two new indexes to measure social development.

The World Bank estimates that there are 1.3 billion people living in poverty in the world today. But based on national definitions of poverty, another 500 million should be added to that, taking into account middle to high income countries alone, says Social Watch.

The report points out that the one dollar a day indicator does not apply equally well to all regions. The Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) puts the threshold for extreme poverty at two dollars a day, while in the United States it is estimated at around 12 dollars a day, it notes.

“This indicator has led World Bank researchers to claim that ‘globalisation is working,’ since it seems to imply that the proportion of people living in poverty in the world as a whole is declining,” said Social Watch coordinator Roberto Bissio.

By adopting that indicator, the international community - which decided in 2000 to undertake a frontal assault on hunger and inequality - “takes some distance from the views of...Nobel Prize-winning economist Amartya Sen, who states that poverty must be seen as the deprivation of basic capabilities rather than merely as lowness of incomes,” said Bissio, a Uruguayan activist.

Even the very first goal - halving the proportion of people living on less than a dollar a day - will be achieved by 2015 only in Europe, the Middle East, Central Asia and perhaps North Africa, says Social Watch.

The World Bank estimates that there are 1.3 billion people living in poverty in the world today. But based on national definitions of poverty, another 500 million should be added to that, taking into account middle to high income countries alone.

In Latin America, the slow pace of progress will make it impossible to reach the target by 2015. And in sub-Saharan Africa, “the situation is especially bleak, as the number of people living in poverty actually grew by 140 million between 1995 and 2004,” it adds.

The Basic Capabilities Index (BCI) developed by Social Watch is based on three indicators: the proportion of births attended by skilled health personnel, under-five infant mortality, and the proportion of children who stay in school through the fifth grade.

One global conclusion is that “extreme

poverty is not declining and is actually increasing in Africa, Latin America, the Middle East, Eastern Europe and most of Asia, where progress is concentrated in Vietnam, India and China.”

The five countries that rank lowest on the BCI are Chad, Ethiopia, Rwanda, Guinea-Bissau, Niger, while the top five are Switzerland, Sweden, Portugal, the Netherlands and New Zealand.

“We are trying out new indexes and we hope to build serious comparative analyses,” Uruguayan sociologist Karina Batthyány told IPS. Batthyány coordinated the team of Social Watch researchers.

In different tests, “the BCI correlated positively with all of the development indicators that we work with,” in measuring factors like food security, health and education, she said.

By leaving out the income variable, the BCI does not require household surveys by governments, and makes it possible to use measurements at the national, regional or municipal levels.

The other focus of the Social Watch report is inequality between men and women, which continues to exist in all countries, according to the global coalition, which argues that if the playing field is not levelled, no development strategy is possible.

Social Watch’s new Gender Equity Index takes into account education, economic activity and “empowerment”, or participation in political and economic decision-making, to come up with a figure that is not connected to a country’s socioeconomic development level.

Empowerment includes the share of parliamentary seats and ministerial posts held by women, and the proportion of women professionals.

With respect to economic activity, the new index considers the proportion of women in the labour force and the income gap, measured by dividing the total wages earned by women by those earned by men.

And in education, female enrolment rates at all three levels of schooling are taken into account.

“The GEI makes it possible to rank and compare countries, although one of its limitations is the lack of available information,” said Batthyány. The index was used to classify 134 countries on a scale of 1 to 12.

The countries that earned the highest possible score (12) were Australia, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden. The lowest-ranking countries were Yemen, Cote d’Ivoire, Egypt, Pakistan and Togo.



In Passing

Photos: Paulino Menezes

Rock star and debt relief champion Bob Geldof steals the show with some frank, and at times, outrageous comments. 'The summit document deserves a grade of no more than 4 out of 10; Canada is weird; and people in the developed world may have lost the top hat and umbrella, but they are still swirling around the dead bodies of the poor lying on the ground,' were some of his comments at yesterday's press conference on progress made towards development since the G8 meeting in Gleneagles, Scotland, in July.

Outside, on 1st Avenue, peaceful demonstrations continue. A small group of orthodox Jews embraces the cause of Palestine, while another small group of Jews does the opposite.

Maybe the lone supporter of Chávez had expected some friends to join her...She had to raise the banners all by herself, while inside the UN Secretariat her hero was soaking up the love from delegates tickled by his combative address to the General Assembly.

Portrayed by the US media as a blood-thirsty fanatic and kidnapper, the president of Iran, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, looks rather shy and youthful at his meeting with his Russian colleague, Vladimir Putin.

