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World Development Forum Begins With a Rebuke

By RACHEL L. SWARNS

JOHANNESBURG, Aug. 26 — Tens of thousands of officials, environmentalists and advocates for the poor converged on this old mining city today to devise an ambitious blueprint to promote development while protecting natural resources.

Participants from all over the world flocked to the United Nations' World Summit on Sustainable Development in flowing African robes, Indian saris and pinstriped suits. They celebrated the spirit of global solidarity and vowed to hammer out a plan to protect rain forests, to clean polluted air and to help millions of people escape from poverty.

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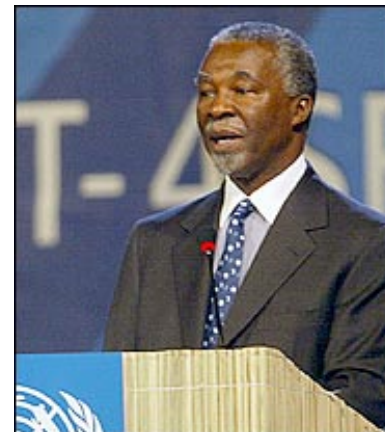
More than 100 presidents and prime ministers, including most European leaders, will attend this summit meeting to show their commitment to their new pledges. But many here are expressing doubts about the developed nations' sincerity and are especially critical of the fact that President Bush, the leader of the world's biggest economy and its largest polluter, has decided not to attend.

American officials here today said they were committed to the meeting's agenda

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Agence France-Presse

President Thabo Mbeki of South Africa called for an end to the rift between the world's rich and poor at the opening today of the World Summit on Sustainable Development.

THE PARTICIPANTS: 190 countries. More than 100 world leaders are expected to arrive next week, including Britain's Tony Blair and Germany's Gerhard Schroeder.

THE ISSUES: The summit is focusing on five main issues: providing water and sanitation to poor nations, increasing access to sustainable energy, improving health care in the developing world, improving agricultural methods and protecting the world's biodiversity.

THE OUTCOMES: The summit will produce a declaration and an implementation plan at its conclusion.

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and would soon announce investments of more than \$970 million in projects to provide access clean water to Africa and other developing nations. They said they want to focus on offering concrete support for specific projects instead of getting mired in debates about the targets and time frames for foreign aid that the developing nations are seeking.

But as participants gathered in the gleaming convention center here, nearly everyone was haunted by the failures of the past.

Ten years ago, the world's leaders left the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro with an ambitious agenda that is mostly remembered by the participants here as a string of broken promises and squandered opportunities. In his opening speech today, President Thabo Mbeki of South Africa said pointedly that the world had stood by and allowed environmental degradation and deepening poverty to threaten the future of the Earth.

Mr. Mbeki said leaders had failed to muster the political will to reduce poverty and to protect natural resources despite the promises made in Rio de Janeiro. He urged officials to develop a plan during this 10-day meeting to rescue a world increasingly characterized by dying lakes, retreating forests, global warming and desperately poor people.

"Poverty, underdevelopment, inequality within and among countries, together with the worsening global ecological crisis, sum up the dark shadow under which most of the world lives," Mr. Mbeki said in his speech. "It is no secret that the global community has, as yet, not demonstrated the will to implement the decisions it has freely adopted."

"We need to take stock of the inertia of the past decade and agree on very clear and practical measures that will help us to deal decisively with all the challenges that we face," he added. "This is the central task of this summit."

The officials here applauded his words. But as the day wore on and negotiators huddled in the ballrooms, it was clear that coming up with a strong plan would be very difficult.

No new treaties will be signed here. Instead, negotiators are focusing on the link between poverty and environmental degradation and on how to spur growth in poor countries while protecting the environment.

But there are deep disagreements between rich and poor nations about how to achieve those goals.

Poor countries say they need to improve their economies before they will be in a position to protect their natural resources. They want wealthy nations to provide aid to developing countries equal to 0.7 percent of the wealthy nations' gross national products. They also want the wealthy nations to reduce or eliminate tariffs on agricultural goods from poor countries and, by 2015, to reduce by half the number of people who lack access to sanitation.

Officials from the United States and the European Union have refused to make commitments for time frames to eliminate agricultural subsidies, which protect their farmers from foreign competition. "We do not see Johannesburg as a place to have these negotiations," said Catherine Day of the European Union at a news conference today.

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The European Union is willing to discuss setting targets for increasing foreign assistance to the poor and for converting to renewable energy sources, but the United States opposes such measures.

"I think goals are important, but they're only lofty rhetoric without the commitment of resources," said John F. Turner, the assistant secretary of state for oceans and international environmental and scientific affairs.

"The opportunity here is for partners to start committing resources in these critical areas to reduce poverty and ensure a more sustainable future," Mr. Turner said. "That's what we ought to be focused on."

But officials from developing nations said the wealthy countries were being inflexible. "What's in there for us?" asked one official, who supports specific targets for foreign aid. "We're not advancing at all."

Nearly 25 percent of the summit meeting's action plan remained contested today. As diplomats scrambled for consensus, some officials warned that the meeting might produce little more than reaffirmations of old promises.

Environmentalists and advocates for the poor are already vowing to march through the streets by the thousands on Saturday to ensure that the link between poverty and environmental decay remains high on the agenda. Much of their anger is directed at President Bush.

Last year, President Bush upset many leaders when he rejected a treaty negotiated in Kyoto, Japan, which set targets for reducing emissions of greenhouse gases.

Marcel Furtado, a Brazilian representative of the advocacy group Greenpeace, said both developing and developed countries were to blame for the failure of pledges made in Rio de Janeiro in 1992.

Mr. Furtado said many delegates had learned from the failures of the past. He said they resented the United States and the European Union, to some extent, for blocking efforts to infuse this meeting's action plan with new and concrete commitments. "We have a job to do, which is to deliver change," he said. "It looks like the real issues are not making it into the document."

Klaus Toepfer, the executive director of the United Nations Environment Program, urged negotiators to strive for consensus, no matter how difficult the negotiations become. No one, he said, can afford to give up.

"The eyes of the world are upon us here waiting for signs that we are able to bridge our differences," he said. "The time has come to translate our political commitment into action."

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Web Site: [Text: Mbeki's Speech \(un.org\)](#)

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