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Annan urges rich nations not to drop aid to Africa

Katrin Bennhold
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Kofi Annan, one of the world's most outspoken activists for Africa, issued a stern warning to rich nations on Monday not to use the current economic turmoil as an excuse to turn their back on his continent.

"It would be incredibly short-sighted - as well as immoral - for wealthy countries to use this financial crisis to drop promises to help the poorest," Annan said at a debate in Paris. Instead, the former secretary general of the United Nations urged harnessing the current momentum for an overhaul of international financial institutions to revive stalled efforts for a more representative UN Security Council.

Speaking with some emotion about the election of Barack Obama, and the pressures on the president-elect to deal with recession at home, Annan made a direct appeal to Obama: "Some international issues cannot wait."

Praising the weekend Group of 20 meeting in Washington as a blueprint for more cooperation between advanced and emerging economies, Annan said the combination of a truly global crisis and election of a multiethnic American president offered a rare chance to realign international governance to match 21st-century realities.

"The time is now," Annan said on the margins of the debate, arguing that rich countries had a choice between "collaboration and destructive competition."
Annan, a native of Ghana who is now chairman of the nongovernmental Africa Progress Panel, has long lobbied for institutional changes.

On his watch at the UN, a far-reaching shake-up of the world body was proposed before being significantly watered down. Efforts to enlarge the Security Council failed.

Speaking with characteristic elegance at the Forum for New Diplomacy, co-hosted by the International Herald Tribune and the Academie Diplomatique Internationale, Annan said that he had been deeply moved by the election of Obama, an event he said he had not expected to see in his lifetime.

"I think Obama represents something that for the United States and for all of us is a dream. He transcends what until recently defined Americans," Annan said.
"He is an American, he is an African, he is an Asian," Annan said, in an apparent reference to Obama's Kenyan father, his Muslim second name - Hussein - and a stint in Indonesia during his childhood years.

"He is a man who has a capacity to unite," Annan added, "and this is what we need in the world today."

Annan warned that the financial turmoil must not distract wealthy countries from mass poverty and violent conflict in several African countries. Food shortages and migration related to climate change now compound a drying up of foreign investment, he said.

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He urged advanced nations to live up to their commitment to double aid to Africa by 2010, warning: "Unless something dramatic is done, we will not even come close." Traditional donors like the Europeans should work with newer ones, like China, in particular on infrastructure. He said the international community should send a rapid reaction force to Congo, "to allow time and space for negotiation to go on." In part, this seemed motivated by reflections on the world's failings in Darfur.

Responding to a claim by Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, for example, who said Washington had worked "day and night" to end human rights violations in Darfur, Annan smiled before remarking: "I don't know about day and night. It depends how long your days and your nights are."

"The world could not give them 18 helicopters," he said. "We could have done more - and should."