

Too little, too late at the G8

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Published on Haaretz Op-Ed page
Monday, July 11 2005

The struggle to come up with the right interpretation of the G8 summit in Scotland was over before it began. British Prime Minister Tony Blair and the rest of the Western leaders who stood by him during Thursday's terror attacks in London did what politicians everywhere do well: They drew simplistic lines between good and evil, and then presented their agenda as the pure essence of good. In London, they declared to the cameras, murderers who don't value human life were running loose, while they themselves had gathered at Gleneagles to save and improve lives.

The fact that in London the murderous face of global terror was once again exposed does not automatically make anyone who opposes it into a defender of humanity. The G8 summit must be judged by its results - not by the symbolic value of the anti-terror stance of the leaders at the summit. And on this account it was a major disappointment.

The \$50-billion increase in aid to Africa seems like a big step. But Africa has a population of 700 million living in more than 60 countries, and the increase - which was already settled during the G8 finance ministers' summit in June - won't make history. It's too little, too late, and it will take too long for the money to have much of an influence on life in Africa.

The G8 decision to eradicate debts is also deceptive. This virtual move might improve the bargaining positions of African countries in their negotiations with the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank over credit, but will not exempt them from the immediate necessity of paying their heavy debts to the commercial banks.

In addition, African countries must meet the demands of international funding authorities for instituting reforms and restructuring their economies if they want to receive financial aid and have their debts erased. Often, the practical implication

of such reforms is that countries open their local markets to international corporations interested in making an easy profit from natural resources, land and cheap labor, leaving only a fraction of the profits for the residents.

Another problem for the Africans is the subsidies Western farmers receive, which make it possible for them to produce food and market it at low prices. These subsidies effectively constitute a hidden tariff, preventing food producers in Africa from taking advantage of the abundance of land, climate and cheap labor for marketing food to the West. Changing the subsidy structure would have opened up new markets for Africa and give an economic chance that does not entail further dependence on the international finance system. It infuriates me that the eight knights of the global free market have left this painful issue for another time.

What happened or did not happen at the G8 summit with regard to global warming only adds to the feeling of disappointment. Blair, who for years has described climate changes as the central problem of the 21st century, tried to bridge the gap between most countries in the world who have signed the Kyoto Protocols on the environment, and the United States, which refuses to sign it.

He believes that isolating the United States as the "bad guy" will not change the position of George W. Bush, and will only give new financial giants China and India an excuse for not meeting their environmental obligations.

The problem is that Blair's desire to avoid conflict with Bush makes him his ally - even if Blair did not have much of a choice. The joint declaration, which was formulated at Gleneagles in such a way that even Bush could agree to sign it, states that global warming is happening, that it is dangerous and that mankind contributes to it. This represents a change in Bush's stated position, bringing him up to par on a matter on which most world scientists agreed more than a decade ago. But the declaration doesn't obligate him to take any practical step. On the contrary: Over the last few days Bush has spoken a lot about the importance of the "post-Kyoto arrangements," meaning that he is not joining the Kyoto signatories.

Instead of Kyoto, Bush has bought quiet on his country's industrial front until 2012, although the United States is still responsible for 25 percent of greenhouse gas emissions. That's enough time to increase the legendary wealth of the oil companies, power stations owners and car manufacturers -

Bush's political allies - and also to greatly increase the dangers to the future of humankind