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By: Joan Baxter, Bamako

They weren't numerous, but in the tradition of protestors everywhere, they were spirited and noisy. About 250 people were marching down Independence Boulevard in the Malian capital, Bamako, bellowing belligerent slogans, fists raised. 'Down with the World Bank! Down with the IMF! Down with neo-liberalism! Another Africa is possible!'

But this was not your usual bunch of protesting malcontents, this was a different kind of demonstration altogether and a first on the continent. This time the protestors were not attacking the Malian government for their woes. They were hurling insults at industrialised countries and their financial institutions, which they claim dictate the policies that make African governments so unpopular with their people - privatisation, structural adjustment, open markets and cutbacks in social services.

The demonstrators came from 45 African countries and a wide range of backgrounds - trade unions, farmers' and women's groups, NGOs and academics. They'd been five days in Bamako for the first-ever Africa Social Forum and now they had taken to the streets seeking a bit of publicity for their cause.

They said their aim was to find an African voice to join the anti-globalisation chorus, something called the World Social Movement. That movement has made it almost impossible for leaders of the world's eight most industrialised nations, the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund or the World Trade Organisation to gather anywhere on the planet without confronting many thousands of protestors. The World Social Movement against globalisation meets once a year in Porto Alegre, Brazil, to counter a simultaneous meeting of the world's corporate community called the World Economic Forum.

But none of this lofty stuff sparks much interest among the average man or woman on the street in Mali, more concerned with daily survival.

The lack of public support didn't deter the protestors. Honoré Ndoumbe Nkotto, who heads an agricultural NGO in Cameroon, maintains Africans are just starting to understand the source of their problems. 'They are suffering and dying and they have understood that the main actors are the World Bank and IMF. We had a type of plot against us, the debt being one of the major problems. We don't believe Africa has leaders they were supposed to have, we are not even sure who put them in power.'

Ibrahim Ghandour, president of the Sudanese Union of Workers' Federation, said he was marching for 'a new world where there is justice and quality'. Asked if that wasn't a rather

tall order for a handful of demonstrators in the Malian capital, he replied, 'It's a symbol. We represent millions behind us.'

If public comprehension was lacking, bravado was not. The anti-globalisation protestors rallied for song and dance and speeches at the headquarters of Mali's main trade union in Bamako. The rhetoric was reminiscent of Africa's independence struggle five decades ago, perhaps not surprising as it was led by Ben Bella, Algeria's father of independence. At 84 years of age, Bella is still going strong. His voice cracking with age and emotion, he declared, 'Today in Bamako, we are burying capitalism.' The enthusiastic militants around him seemed convinced.

But even the African activists who met in Mali had to admit that just about every government on the continent has swallowed structural adjustment programmes of the World Bank and IMF without a whimper of protest.

A year ago, World Bank president James Wolfensohn and IMF head, Horst Koehler, made Bamako their first stop on their first-ever joint African tour. After walking the red carpet, the two men were feted and cheered at the airport by mobs of tiny tots who had been hauled out of kindergarten and armed with flags bearing the World Bank logo. President Alpha Oumar Konare gave the two men royal treatment and they managed to make it through their visit without confronting more than a handful of protestors demanding a cancellation of the debt. None of the ten African heads of state who flew in to meet with Wolfensohn and Koehler uttered a single word of criticism of either financial institution, at least not publicly.

Those leading Africa's anti-globalisation movement argue that this is to be expected. Yash Tandon, director of the Southern and Eastern African Trade Information and Negotiations Institute in Zimbabwe, maintains that there is 'not one regime in Africa that can take a position independent of the IMF and World Bank'. According to Tandon, 'Most African countries are headed by governments that have already compromised and most of them are serving their own interests in retaining the system they have.' He says when governments feel the pressure from their people hard-hit by structural adjustment, privatisation and the debt, African leaders may try to put across different positions, as they did recently at WTO meetings in Qatar. 'But those positions don't last very long because they then come under pressure from the donor community to fall in line for fear of sanctions. So they do fall in line. It's a big battle.'

Tandon claims that leaders who don't fall in line 'don't last long.' He cites the example of the late president of Burkina Faso, Thomas Sankara, assassinated in 1987, allegedly with the backing of internal and external forces offended by his revolutionary rhetoric denouncing neo-colonialism and defending economic independence.

Mali's former minister of culture, Aminata Dramane Traore, who helped organise the Bamako Forum along with the NGO Enda Tiers Monde in Senegal, has written two books critical of the World Bank and IMF. She dismisses their claims that they are leading the fight against poverty in Africa. 'They are producing poverty. I don't see any difference between this team of winners at the international level and our political leaders. They just maintain themselves by making money from the poorest. What do they say about their own salaries? These people, well-paid, from Washington, knowing everything about poverty while poverty is just increasing. It's just a shame.'

Traore says that because of the Bamako Forum, Africa was able for the first time to take its own anti-globalisation stand to the World Social Forum in Brazil in February. But Africa's representation – a mere 200 people – in the total of 60,000 anti-globalisation activists from elsewhere on the planet, can hardly be said to be significant. Even in Bamako, there were divisions among those claiming to lead Africa's attack against globalisation.

Still, the African activists did seem able to agree on what they rejected - just about every existing economic policy in Africa, as well as the New Partnership for African Development (NEPAD), which they say was developed by the presidents of South Africa, Algeria and Nigeria without the participation of civil society.

The alternatives they propose, however, are somewhat vague; they call for 'a human-centred world' and held their forum under the theme: 'Another Africa is possible.'

Such utopian declarations are not likely to wash with impoverished millions who may not relate to the lofty jargon or believe that international social fora are going to solve their immediate daily problems of feeding and education their children.

And many people who are sympathetic to the movement say they don't join in because they see it as futile. Says one prominent Malian journalist, 'If you oppose the World Bank and IMF, your government will fall and then another will come and just go back to them for money. It's a lost battle.'