

Relaxed Mali village hosts 'poor people's Kananaskis'

'We are doing it our way with very little money,' organizers say of event focusing on Africa's plight

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SIBY, Mali — The dirt road leading to the mud and thatch village of Siby, nestled in the Mandingo Mountains, is barely passable.

But that hasn't stopped about 200 people from all walks of life — farmers, women's groups, academics, development workers and religious leaders — from assembling for what organizers are calling "the poor people's Kananaskis."

The three-day event is arranged by Jubilee 2000, an umbrella group of debt cancellation campaigns and social movements from Africa, Asia, Latin America and Europe.

The movement's goal is "to lift nations and their peoples out of foreign-debt bondage and to struggle for global economic and social justice."

In Siby the mood is relaxed and typical of rural West Africa. People assemble under mango trees to chat. There isn't a police officer or gun in sight. Children chase a soccer ball, or amuse themselves by tagging along excitedly behind the visitors.

The rainy season has just begun so the dust has settled, the searing heat diminished and some people are already hoeing their fields, sowing millet and maize, when they're not drumming and dancing to entertain the visitors who have flocked to their village for this poor people's summit.

Participants are being put up in thatch-roofed huts lit by kerosene lanterns. A mere 50 kilometres from the Malian capital, Bamako, Siby has no running water, no electric power, no telephones and no health facilities.

According to Barry Aminata Traore, president of Jubilee 2000, this summit is meant to contrast with the lavish and heavily guarded G-8 summit in Kananaskis, Alta., where she says "isolated leaders will be deciding the destinies of millions and millions of people on all continents, which will serve the interests of the multinationals, industrialized countries and corrupt governments in the south."

Traore says it is a "shame that the G-8 leaders will not have a chance to meet with ordinary African people," whom, she points out, were not invited to Canada for "the rich people's Kananaskis."

"We are doing it our way, with very little money," she says, although she adds that at the last minute the Canadian embassy in Mali agreed to help finance the Siby summit. "Other embassies from the G-8 countries refused to help us."

"Africa is going to be at the heart of the debate in Kananaskis," she says. "But Africa each year pays \$376 billion (U.S.) in debt repayment, that deprives her of resources needed for development. "The ills that plague Africa are liberalized trade, plunging prices for raw materials and privatization, all of which threaten peace and security in the world because of social and economic injustices."

Organizers say the idea of the Siby summit is for Africans to come up with their own proposals to solve their problems and ease the debt and suffering on the continent. Aminata Dramane Toure, a Malian sociologist and author, says she is not impressed by Prime Minister Jean Chrétien's promises that the G-8 summit in Canada will put Africa high on its agenda.

Even the proposed New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) program, promoted by four African heads of state — Thabo Mbeki of South Africa, Olusegun Obasanjo of Nigeria, Abdoulaye Wade of Senegal and Abdelaziz Bouteflika of Algeria, fails to address the realities of Africa today, she says.

"I don't think four neo-liberal African heads of state can speak on behalf of all Africa," says Toure, who says she is "very sorry" the people of Africa were not consulted when NEPAD was drawn up.

"NEPAD doesn't take into account African realities, that people are hungry and in need of education and health care. It talks only about infrastructure and money, money, money. Here in Mali we have lots of foreign investment in gold exploitation and it has done nothing for the people."

Toure feels NEPAD is "dangerous" because it will confuse a concerned public in the developed world into believing their governments are really doing something for Africa when in fact, she suggests, "it's more of the same thing: other people deciding what is good for Africa.

"That just leads to more failures and despair on the continent."

Toure points out the G-8 leaders refused to attend a recent summit in Rome on hunger and said she has no faith in any decisions they will take about Africa when they are barricaded in the mountains in Canada.

Organizers say Siby — a world away from the G-8 leaders and the luxury of Kananaskis — has great symbolic importance for the people of Africa. In 1235 AD, this small village was the setting for another summit when the first constitution was drawn up for the mighty Mali Empire. They hope that will inspire the participants and that "Siby will be the point of departure for a new conscience in Africa."