

Friday, 14 September 2007

President Omar Bongo Ondimba's clarification speech on the projected commissioning of the Belinga iron mine

- "Excellencies,

- Ladies and Gentlemen,

I invited you here today for a clarification meeting which seemed to me to be indispensable at the start-up of the project of the century which entails the commissioning of the Belinga iron mine and the construction of the related infrastructure required.

Many people have questions concerning this file, particularly relative to the conservation of the environment and the ecosystems with respect to the major works to be undertaken.

I would like to share with you a brief outline of my vision of the problem. The Government will then be able to transpose it in relation to the "Belinga" file.

The son of country people whose main activities were farming and hunting, a love of nature was my birthright. I grew up with nature; I loved nature, and learned to respect it. I was therefore already an ecologist. Because I believe that in essence, that is what ecology is.

When I became President of the Republic, I did not change. On the contrary, what was for me a natural predisposition has become a conviction and a commitment.

Reforestation policy, Ministry for the Protection of Nature (back in 1980), Protection of animal species - in what other country have elephants been allowed to cause damage to the plantations of peaceful citizens in the name of animal protection, as is the case at Sette Cama?

This is to say that a continuous concern for the "environmental" dimension has been a constant component of my policy line.

Thus, unlike most other countries, particularly the developed countries, Gabon has always respected the commitments made at international level at the Earth Summit in Rio, in 1992, and at the Johannesburg Summit, ten years later.

We signed, ratified and implemented the Kyoto Protocol on the greenhouse gas emissions that pose a serious threat to our planet.

This same Protocol, so important for Humanity, that the major developed nations, from which the NGO present in Gabon originated, refuse to implement.

As far as biodiversity is concerned, Gabon, which is 80% covered by forest and has a population of only one and a half million, is still virgin territory, more than protected.

The problem of the environment could therefore have been considered not to be ours.

But, as Terentius the philosopher said, "I am a human being; I consider nothing human to be foreign to me". It is for this reason that I took the sovereign decision to reserve for Humanity 11% of the country's land area.

By creating 13 national parks, Gabon has become the second country in the world, after Costa Rica, to protect nature to this extent. And I am willing to go even further.

But, you see, I am the President, like other Presidents, of a country and a people who also, like other countries and peoples, aspire to development, to well-being, to progress and prosperity. And every day that God gives me, I strive towards this goal.

How, then, are we to understand that those who have not succeeded in imposing or imposing on themselves a minimum of preventive measures in favour of the environment come to us, using a media uproar, lies and slander to force my country to sacrifice its development on the altar of nature?

They want to turn it into a simple reserve solely intended to recycle the carbon dioxide emitted by their large nations which, for their part, selfishly refuse to respect the environment.

Whereas one of the missions of these NGO - within the framework of a veritable North-South solidarity and a real planetary partnership should be to inform, raise awareness and draw the attention of the industrialized countries to our problems, and encourage them to accompany our efforts in this domain through appropriate funding.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

We have undertaken a major project, which is to build a railway, a hydroelectric power station, a deepwater port, to satisfy the legitimate aspirations of the Gabonese people to a minimum of development and well-being. These infrastructures are indispensable to the exploitation of the Bélinga mining deposits. Their implantation and construction will obviously perturb the ecosystems of the regions concerned to a certain extent.

But this vast project does not in any way call into question the policy I have instigated in terms of the environment, expressed, in particular, in the law pertaining to the national parks. For this law expressly stipulates that any loss of a part of the territory of a national park incurred through economic necessity must be offset in equal measure.

What does this mean?

It means, quite simply, that what I take from here, I replace it elsewhere and there is no imbalance.

But between this and preventing all development, there is a step I am not prepared to take for while I must conserve nature, I must also ensure the development of Gabon.

Yesterday, should we not have built the Transgabon railway network, when it is now a major tool for our development and an asset appreciated by everyone?

Today, should we not build Belinga when this file was opened at the same time as the Transgabon and is finally completed today?

And the deepwater port at Santa Clara, indispensable for the evacuation of iron ore from Belinga, should we forget about it?

And the new Libreville airport, should we postpone building it and continue to use an airport which is at present situated right in the middle of the city?

And the numerous types of mineral deposits (over 900), gold, diamonds, baryte, iron, manganese, uranium, the list is long. Should we leave them eternally in the subsoil when we have to ensure the future of generations to come?

No. Because the development of a country is the first mission of any Head of State.

What is important, in any case, is not to sacrifice Man or Nature but to ensure a sustainable balance between Man, all men, and our shared home, the planet Earth.

This is my commitment to the international community and to the people of Gabon. I have defined a policy and I have given precise, firm and permanent instructions to the government of the Republic on this subject.

I now ask the government to provide a presentation of the motives concerning the situation of the Belinga project to date.

Thank you very much."