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CONFERENCE AGAINST RACISM

Africans harden stand on reparations

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Delegates negotiating the final text of the declaration for a global antiracism conference were jolted yesterday when African countries suddenly hardened their position and formed a united front demanding financial reparations for the damage done by slavery and colonialism.

Just days after several heads of state from the continent signalled their willingness to compromise and settle for an apology and more aid rather than compensation directly tied to historical wrongs, African countries, acting as a bloc, presented a discussion paper that resurrects the reparations debate.

"The African position is a tough one," one Canadian official said.

The paper, presented yesterday to delegates at the United Nations World Conference Against Racism, urges those countries that profited from colonialism or the slave trade to take "appropriate remedial and other measures in order to halt and reverse" the lasting impacts of both.

The paper contends that the twin legacies of colonialism and slavery are to blame for the wide development gap between Africa and the rest of the world.

Over the weekend, several influential Afri-

can leaders, including Nigerian President Olusegun Obasanjo and South African leader Thabo Mbeki, gave speeches to the conference suggesting that apologies and aid would be acceptable substitutes for reparations.

Those speeches caused a rift among African delegates, and the new paper suggests that hard-liners won the internal debate.

"Let us not be too worried about who will be compensated, and how," Awa Bah, Gambia's attorney-general, said. "Let us resolve that reparations should be commensurate with the magnitude of the crimes that were committed."

Most Western countries would prefer to see amends made for slavery in an indirect fashion, so as not to set a precedent that could see descendants of slaves all over the world launch lawsuits against countries that profited.

By resurrecting the spectre of reparations, the paper also sets back the debate over whether former colonial and slave-trading powers owe Africa a formal apology. Many Western countries don't want to use the word "apology" but are willing to accept that "a statement of regret" is due. The exact wording is still the subject of intense negotiations.

Canada, which is worried about the impact a UN endorsement of reparations or an

apology might have in domestic courts, presented a paper this week along with the United States, Norway, Japan, Australia and New Zealand that expresses "profound regret" for the slave trade.

While Canada portrays itself as trying to seek the middle ground between Africa and Europe, some Canadians who believe they are owed reparations for wrongs suffered by their ancestors say the government is failing them.

"These issues are very important to people of African descent," said Maria Omene, who is representing the Immigrant Women of Saskatchewan at the conference. "Whatever the positions of Europe are, Canada agrees. We should be standing on our own two feet."

The slavery issue isn't the only one bogging down negotiations on what the eight-day conference's final declaration will say. The Middle East issue has already caused Israel and the United States to walk out in anger, and drafting a list of groups affected by racial discrimination has proved equally thorny.

Of the 185 paragraphs contained in the most recent draft declaration, 80 remain the subject of debate, with just three days remaining in the conference.

One delegate described negotiators as shell-shocked.