SPEECH MADE BY HIS EXCELLENCY AGBEYOME MESSAN KODJO
PRIME MINISTER OF TOGO
ON THE OCCASION OF THE FIRST WORLD COFFEE CONFERENCE
(DINNER)

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Mr. Chairman of the World Coffee Conference,
Mr. Executive Director of the International Coffee Organization,
The Organisers,
The Sponsors,
Ladies and Gentlemen:

Thank you for having given me the opportunity this evening to exchange ideas with you once more on a subject that concerns us all: coffee, once a source of prosperity for our countries and a major factor in the development of our economies. As a cash crop, it contributed, along with other commodities, to the well-being of our peasants and the improvement of their living standards.

Today, following a sequence of various events, Africa's coffee sector is in danger and our peasant producers are facing an extremely precarious situation. Enforced liberalization, the weakness of world prices, the abolition of stabilization funds and the boards responsible for regulating prices to producers have led to the emergence of a stream of businessmen who care little for the interests of our peasants and buy standing crops from growers at derisory prices. And in most cases affluent foreigners have replaced nationals in these transactions with producers.

These peasant producers, unable to cover their production costs, are victims of the shameless speculation which is one of the reasons for the dwindling of African coffee production.

In my view it has become a matter of urgency for the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, in collaboration with our respective governments, to examine the pressing need for the establishment of a price stabilization fund managed by producer organizations, buyers and governments to ensure the interests of the rural masses against the extremely wide fluctuations in world commodity prices. Africa would also not be in a position to subscribe to the Quebec Declaration recommending the suspension of the World Bank's financial support for the rehabilitation of the coffee sector in which Africa's share of the world market is constantly shrinking.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

In view of the tragedy unfolding in the African continent – flash points, famine, AIDS, poor schooling, the upsurge in crime – I believe that our partners in the international community should face up to their historical responsibilities.

It should be recalled that the dark continent was the victim of centuries of slavery, colonialism and unequal exchanges, while the current wave of globalization has, so far, not been good for all concerned. This phenomenon has accentuated the economic and social gap between North and South. Twenty percent of the population living in the North controls 80 percent of the world's wealth and, in Africa, between 350 and 400 million of the continent's 800 million people live below the poverty line.

In the countries of the North, annual expenditure on cosmetics and pet products is apparently as high as US$25 billion, while pharmaceutical companies are still reluctant to make generic drugs to combat AIDS more widely available.

Our friends the affluent countries should remember the sacrifices made by Africa over the years, willingly or unwillingly, for the development of the West.

There is no doubt that Africa has fertile soils, abundant mineral resources and human resources of the highest quality. We are asking for technology transfers to enable us to produce finished and semi-finished goods for the international market, to create

national wealth, and to reduce unemployment levels among our young people who seem to have no future given the budgetary difficulties facing our states. We are asking for unconditional cancellation of bilateral and multilateral debt payments since these debts have, in fact, already been amortized in constant terms but still represent a heavy burden for our public finances given the rising cost of foreign currency. We would like to introduce plans for structural change with budgetary backing since without this all our programmes only succeed in creating poverty, which robs a man of his dignity.

Democracy and the rights of man are universal values that guarantee a man's freedom and allow him to liberate his creative genius to develop his environment.

These values should not be used as blackmail weapons for the expression of international solidarity. All human beings love liberty. Let us give these values a chance to flourish in Africa in all their diversity, without trying to establish a standardized objective.

Forgive me for having spoken at such length: we owe a duty to responsible action, to truth, love and respect for others in their difference.

I hope that these London evening reflections on the subject of coffee will provide an impetus for a new dynamics of peace, solidarity and sharing for the benefit of Africa's peasants, women and children.

By achieving this we would be responding to the United Nations appeal that considers poverty to be a violation of the Rights of Man.