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The G7 finance ministers' meeting

Africa expects

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Hoping for actions, not just words

WHEN Nelson Mandela asks a favour, it is hard to refuse. So pay attention this weekend when the G7 finance ministers meet in London to see whom Madiba, as South Africa's ex-president is fondly known, sweet-talks. Invited by Britain's Gordon Brown, he has a specific role to play. The heads of government summit in July is supposed to focus on Africa. And Mr Mandela will be able to bring moral pressure to bear on anyone steeled against Britain's plans for more aid, debt relief and trade concessions for the continent. Watch to see whether Madiba's arm goes around the shoulders of the penny-pinching German or American representatives.

Africa's hopes are high. A group of leaders, notably Thabo Mbeki, South Africa's current president, has long pushed a simple proposal: if Africans govern themselves better, as they appear to be doing (wars seem to be declining; some rulers are proving honest and democratic), rich countries should invest more and give more aid. The rich have promised to give a total of only 0.7% of their GDP in foreign aid; in fact, they give far less than that.

Of course, grand schemes to help Africa have failed dismally in the past. Cynics say that the latest is a ruse by the British government, embodied in its Commission for Africa, to show a soft face in foreign policy ahead of a general election. So Africans want long-term commitments: for example, governments and businessmen have earmarked 20 infrastructure projects around the continent, in energy, transport and irrigation, that would boost private economic activity. Donors might make specific pledges to finance these.

African finance ministers who met in Cape Town last month suggested that parts of the continent could usefully absorb much more aid than they get. They like Mr Brown's idea for an International Finance Facility, to lend to Africa against promises of future aid from rich countries. The challenge, though, is to spend any extra money well. That means focusing on better-run countries.

Which, though? One way of choosing is to use the results of the African Peer Review Mechanism, under which governments are visited by experts from elsewhere in Africa who offer advice on how to run countries better. That is likely to produce the usual list (Ghana, Senegal and some others): basket cases like Zimbabwe will not even get a mention.

The Africans would like to see progress on trade too. They believe, with some cause, that the Doha round of world trade talks has lost momentum, with rich countries unwilling to slash farm subsidies and other barriers that limit trade with poor ones. Bright ideas are also needed on how to boost African capacity to trade, by fixing up harbours or sending technical expertise to help with trade negotiations.

Then there is debt. Britain favours large-scale relief: a figure of $80 billion is being thrown around. Not everyone thinks this a good idea: those with a decent credit rating, such as Botswana, might worry that a write-off could put investors off the whole continent. But big aid spenders, such as Japan, may prefer cancelling debt to paying for tricky projects in remote bits of Africa. It should be a busy weekend.

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