

BRITISH BROADCASTING CORPORATION

RADIO 4

TRANSCRIPT OF "FILE ON 4"- AID

CURRENT AFFAIRS GROUP

TRANSMISSION: Tuesday 15th February 2005 2000 - 2040

REPEAT: Sunday 20th February 2005 1700 - 1740

REPORTER: Julian O'Halloran

PRODUCER: Andy Denwood

EDITOR: David Ross

PROGRAMME NUMBER: 05VY3007LHO

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ACTUALITY OF AFRICAN CHILDREN SAYING GRACE

O’HALLORAN: For this class, saying their grace in Southern Africa, the school lunch may be their only meal of the day. Their country, Lesotho, is in its fourth straight year of drought. The food they get comes from the UN’s World Food Programme. But its supplies and funding are dwindling. While the world has given a billion dollars and more for tsunami victims in Asia, major appeals for the starving of Africa have fallen flat.

SACKETT: Sadly, since the tsunami struck, we’ve had no new contributions for Southern Africa. We are facing a donations drought. Hundreds of thousands of people are moving towards death because of not receiving enough food.

O’HALLORAN: In the Year of Africa, Prime Minister Tony Blair has put help for its poor, sick and starving at the top of Britain’s international agenda. But his and Gordon Brown’s rhetoric may have a hollow ring in some African countries. In the small mountain kingdom of Lesotho, File on 4 has found that under half the people who need food aid are not getting it, and that British charities and even UK diplomats are pulling out.

SIGNATURE TUNE

ACTUALITY OF TRAIN SHUNTING

O'HALLORAN: I'm in a railway siding in Maseru, the capital of Lesotho. There are some trucks just pulling out beside me, red, rather rusting trucks that have brought bags of food labelled USA into a warehouse, which is now on my right. And walking into the warehouse I'm walking past pallets stacked with food, the initial impression is a good one, an impression of plenty. There are bags here of maize meal, of beans and pulses, corn soya blend, a kind of flour that has been fortified. But behind this impression of plenty there is a big problem: there is not, in fact, enough food reaching Lesotho from the rest of the world, and hundreds of thousands of people who desperately need it are not getting it.

LOFVALL: What we are looking at is a warehouse where we have two thousand metric tonnes of food stored, but if we look at the monthly needs, we need to distribute, according to our estimation, seven thousand metric tonnes, which means that it's less than a third which we are seeing here, even though it looks very full.

O'HALLORAN: Mads Lofvall deputy director of the United Nations World Food Programme here, says about six hundred thousand people in Lesotho need food aid because their crops have failed. But the agency has only enough to feed a third of them.

ACTUALITY OF CAR DOOR SLAMMING, ENGINE STARTING

O'HALLORAN: From the warehouse we drive with him to see one of the regions worst affected by four years of drought. Year after year the rains have failed in August and September, just before the main growing season. Within twenty minutes of leaving the capital, we see fields of maize plants so sparse and shrivelled that they will produce no crop at all. Other fields Mads Lofvall shows us are entirely bare.

LOFVALL: A lot of the fields have not even been planted and that is attributed to the fact that the people do not have the necessary inputs, meaning that they have been eating the seeds that they were supposed to plant and they don't have money to buy fertilizer.

O'HALLORAN: So things were so desperate last year, a few months ago that they actually ate the seeds they should have planted?

LOFVALL: Yes that's correct. They need to eat the little that they have and that is unfortunately the seeds.

ACTUALITY OF WOMEN WORKING

O'HALLORAN: We have come around twenty kilometres from the capital, around thirteen miles, and we are standing in quite a strong breeze amid fields where the plants really do look rather stunted. The maize crop is just not coming through. It's not going to deliver. In spite of that, the two women in front of me are working, maintaining their field. But the one they are in really doesn't look like it is going to deliver much.

Despite their obvious problems with the land they give us a cheery traditional greeting.

ACTUALITY OF WOMEN SHRIEKING

O'HALLORAN: Good morning ladies.

WOMEN:

O'HALLORAN: What are you doing here, because these crops do not look very good you are working amongst?

WOMEN [VIA INTERPRETER]: They are taking these weeds out and they are saying they can see that this maize is so poor. But God knows what he is doing.

O'HALLORAN: Have you been able to get any food out of this field this year?

WOMEN [VIA INTERPRETER]: Nothing, they cannot get anything. They are not going to get anything now, but maybe they are going to get one bag or two bags.

O'HALLORAN: How will people survive?

WOMEN [VIA INTERPRETER]: They get their food from government and from the World Food Programme. If they don't get it, then they are starving.

O'HALLORAN: They would starve if it was not for ...?

WOMEN [VIA INTERPRETER]: They would starve, yes.

ACTUALITY OF SINGING AT ORPHANAGE

O'HALLORAN: Further south, a few miles from the town of Mafeteng, children finish a singing lesson while waiting for food aid to be given out at their school. Staff say no fewer than one in four of the children are orphans. Most of their parents have died of AIDS. Lesotho has the third highest HIV/AIDS infection rate in the world. One in three adults is thought to have the virus. Teacher Bennett Sehlabo says that whether orphans or not, nearly all the kids come from homes with very little to eat.

SEHLABO: Some of these people, they sleep and wake up without no meal. Especially when the schools are closed on Fridays or let's say Saturdays and Sundays. You can see there is a struggle.

O'HALLORAN: What problems does it present for you teachers when you have children that you know are not getting enough food?

SEHLABO: In the class they are unable to proceed. Their progress is so slow, because the body which is not fed in the morning can't do the work.

O'HALLORAN: They don't have energy?

SEHLABO: Yeah.

O'HALLORAN: And they can't learn if they don't have energy?

SEHLABO: Yeah. Most of the children here, they starve.

O'HALLORAN: You are really saying that most of the children here are, to a greater or lesser extent, short of food - starving was the word you used?

SEHLABO: Greater, to the great extent, yeah.

O'HALLORAN: A line of orphans queue with plastic bags for a monthly food ration to be taken home and shared with their brothers and sisters. Some have guardians waiting nearby. But others are now in effect the head of household. Take Likele Mokhethi, a shy, slightly built girl who to me looks about nine. I am taken aback to learn she's actually thirteen.
Tell me about your own family at home?

MOKHETHI [VIA INTERPRETER]: I am staying with my grandmother, my two brothers and my other little sister.

O'HALLORAN: Where is your mother and father?

MOKHETHI [VIA INTERPRETER]: They have died. My mother passed away in 2003 and my father, I can't remember, because it's long ago.

O'HALLORAN: Do you feel you are getting enough food at the moment or are there some days when you are very hungry?

MOKHETHI [VIA INTERPRETER]: The commodities we are receiving at times are not enough, because in most cases they do not last for a whole month, and we only receive once a month.

O'HALLORAN: Who prepares the food at home when a meal is made?

MOKHETHI [VIA INTERPRETER]: In most cases it is me who is preparing the meal, because my grandmother is very ill. I have a lot of responsibilities because I have to care for my other young sister and collect some water as well.

ACTUALITY OF SPLIT PEAS BEING POURED

O'HALLORAN: Helping hand out the food is a young UN aid worker, Makhauta Seeko. She's cheerful, bright and energetic, in spite of what is often a harrowing job. The more so because a shortage of food aid, due to lack of donations from the richer countries, means that only a quarter of the children here can be fed - the ones who've lost both parents, known here as double orphans.

SEEKO: This is Sophie, there are five in her household therefore she is getting 9 kilograms of pulses.

O'HALLORAN: And she just tipped the pulses into two really rather small, not very strong-looking bags. Let's hope she gets them home okay.

SEEKO: Yes.

O'HALLORAN: And she'll come back and get some of the other foods, will she? Bottles of oil are now being passed out. Let's be clear about this: not all the children in this school are getting food aid. It is just the ones in greatest need, is that right?

SEEKO Yes, only the double orphans

O'HALLORAN: So that was a group of what, I think, about twenty children who we saw lining up, and the rest of them here, they're just watching.

SEEKO: They are not going to receive anything.

O'HALLORAN: So they see this happening and they may be in desperate circumstances themselves at home possibly.

SEEKO: At times when you're coming for distribution, some of these who are not receiving often cry and say why they are not receiving.

O'HALLORAN: Really? They cry and say why not ...

SEEKO: ... I will say I will take them food ...

O'HALLORAN: Why don't we get any?

SEEKO: Yes.

O'HALLORAN: And what do you say to them then?

SEEKO: I often lie and say next month I'll give you and they become consoled and go home.

O'HALLORAN: You console them by having to lie to them?

SEEKO: Yes, I have to.

O'HALLORAN: That's terribly sad, and how do you feel doing that?

SEEKO: It's very bad to lie when you know that in actual fact it's not going to happen.

ACTUALITY OF CAR ENGINE

O'HALLORAN: A few miles away in the town of Mafeteng, Makhauta shows us the yard where aid consignments arrive from the capital. Here they're split up and put on small trucks, which trundle the food out to the villages. The Lesotho government's own disaster relief teams decide which areas get the food and which don't. It's Makhauta Seeko's job to monitor the distribution.

SEEKO: The district has been divided into nine constituencies, and out of that nine we are only covering five. The other four constituencies are not being covered because of shortage of commodities.

O'HALLORAN: So what is happening to the people in those other four constituencies, as you call them?

SEEKO: That means they are dying of hunger and starvation.

O'HALLORAN: How long has that been going on?

SEEKO: More than a year now.

O'HALLORAN: So you haven't supplied any food to four whole areas around here in the last year?

SEEKO: Yes, I haven't supplied anything.

O'HALLORAN: She takes us to one of those four nearby constituencies that's not on the list for receiving UN aid. Here villagers say there's growing hardship because they also get nothing from non-governmental organisations, the so-called NGOs, or the international charities. Right Makhauta, we are in this village. What have you been told about the small building we are going up to now?

SEEKO: I have been told that the owner of this place is a widowed woman, and we are going to look inside and see if she's there.

ACTUALITY OF SEEKO GREETING WOMAN

O'HALLORAN: Hello, hello. We are from the BBC in England. We want to know how the drought is affecting you at the moment, how are you managing for food?

WOMAN [VIA INTERPRETER]: I usually beg, that is how I survive. At times they give, at other times they don't give me anything. Therefore I sleep with hunger.

O'HALLORAN: So you go all day without a meal on some days?

WOMAN [VIA INTERPRETER]: Yes I do. I am feeling very weak because there are times, in many days of the week I spend not having proper food. Ever since from last year I haven't received any aid either from the government or any international NGO's. I don't know how I am going to survive, because for many times we have seen aid going to other areas, not in our area. Therefore the only thing I see for me is death.

O'HALLORAN: The UN says there are now 22 million people who are desperately short of food across Africa. And close to 3 million of them are in Southern Africa. Two years ago, when world attention briefly focused on the drought here, the UN got about 85% of the donations it needed. But today, says the World Food Programme's director for Southern Africa, Mike Sackett, contributions from governments have plummeted, especially since the tsunamis. The suffering in Lesotho is replicated across the region.

SACKETT: The countries that have the biggest problems really are Swaziland, Zimbabwe, Botswana, Lesotho and Namibia and Zambia. In the Southern Africa situation it's not a very visual emergency, but hundreds of thousands of people are moving towards death because of not receiving enough food. Since the tsunami struck we've had no new contributions for Southern Africa, and this is a very considerable worry. We'll be talking with donors over the next few weeks to see if we can get additional contributions for Southern Africa.

O'HALLORAN: So if donor countries give large amounts for tsunami victims, it may well mean that your people in Southern Africa go hungry?

SACKETT: There's a real prospect of that being the case, yes. The world's attention has been on the tsunami, we are not getting contributions since the tsunami struck for Southern Africa. Sadly, we are facing a donations drought. We've only secured about less than one-fourth of what we need for this year. Southern Africa is a forgotten crisis at this time.

O'HALLORAN: In fact, Lesotho's drought is not a year-round phenomenon. There has been recent rain, some of it heavy, but it can end up doing more harm than good, because the infrastructure doesn't exist to store the water or channel it to where it's most needed.

ACTUALITY OF STORM

O'HALLORAN: I'm on the main road south of Maseru in a heavy rainstorm. The problem is, the rain has come at the wrong time. It didn't come in the growing season when it was needed, and now it's doing real damage to the fields. What topsoil there is on the fields is being carried away in great cascades of water down onto the road here and down onto the area below, and this is coming on top of years of problems with the agriculture of this country when the soil has been lost for all sorts of different reasons, and that's only adding to the acute problem they've had over the drought in the last three years.

After the storm, as we drove on, we could see some of the damage done by such torrential rain. In places, whole fields lie abandoned due to erosion - something Lesotho can ill afford because under 10% of the land is cultivable in the first place. However, with help from charities and aid agencies, villagers are now being trained to use farming methods which won't exhaust the land, and in how to combat damage caused by the erratic weather.

ACTUALITY OF WORK PARTY

O'HALLORAN: In one village we see dozens of people building a reservoir of about thirty metres square with high earth banks around it, to conserve the rain. This way maybe they'll have at least some water to put on their vegetable gardens during the next growing season, in case the rains fail yet again. One group training farmers has been the Southern Mountains Association for Rural Transformation and Development. It works in one of Lesotho's poorest regions. The group's director, Palo Mochafo, says the British charity Christian Aid has for ten years been a key supporter, providing 20% of the group's funding.

MOCHAFO: When you are dealing with people with the rural community you are dealing with transformation, try to change the way people see things. And it's going to take time for one, you know, to really get a very good result in that, but I can see now that we are having some good results.

O'HALLORAN: But Palo Mochafo and his group had just had bad news. A Christian Aid official from head office in London had flown to Lesotho to tell them the funding they get from the charity is coming to an end. Support will be phased out over the next two years.

MOCHAFO: We have just received this news. We have to work out ways in which we are going to reduce the damage.

O'HALLORAN: If you are not able to replace that Christian Aid money, what is the future for you?

MOCHAFO: Then we have to resort to maybe a cut in what we have planned to do.

O'HALLORAN: Cutting your staff?

MOCHAFO: Yes.

O'HALLORAN: And your programmes?

MOCHAFO: Yes. Lesotho having a lot of problems, you know, we have had a lot of droughts. It's affecting people especially in the mountains, where the grass has gone already, their livestock is not doing very well, so there is still a need for such support. People should be patient, shouldn't just think that we have been giving these people a lot of money and therefore we must go somewhere else.

O'HALLORAN: Christian Aid is not the only British charity pulling out. War on Want and Save the Children are also leaving. Lesotho's Foreign Minister, Monyane Moleleki, is disappointed by this loss of funding for the NGOs – the non governmental organisations helping farmers.

MOLELEKI: I consider NGOs to be partners in development, people who fill in gaps where there are gaps. And if support to NGOs is being phased out, that's a source of great concern to us.

O'HALLORAN: What would you say, though, to Christian Aid, which has decided to focus its efforts elsewhere in Africa?

MOLELEKI: Well I would appeal to them to reconsider because there is as much need, if not more need, in Lesotho than there was, say, two years ago, what with the AIDS pandemic, with the drought and so on, so we do need support.

O'HALLORAN: Christian Aid told us it's been reviewing its spending across Africa and it now wants to focus more on countries emerging from war and conflict. The head of its Africa Division, Sarah Hughes, says no decision to end funding in a country is taken lightly. Especially when, as in Lesotho, the groups Christian Aid has been supporting have been doing such good work.

HUGHES: We have said to them that as we enter into the new phase of programme work with them for the next couple of years, we will look for ways of them being able to sustain funding to the communities without Christian Aid's support, because we need to be able to look at programmes and projects in other places. We have a great respect for all the people who we work with. We stay with people through thick and thin for the long haul.

O'HALLORAN: You say you stay through thick and thin?

HUGHES: Yes.

O'HALLORAN: But I don't understand, because Lesotho has had three years of drought. Last year, a year ago the government declared a big food emergency, a World Food Programme appeal has fallen flat, farming's in crisis there, they've got an AIDS pandemic, and you at Christian Aid are saying, we've had enough, we're going elsewhere.

HUGHES: Christian Aid actually provided relief support to those communities that we have been involved with during the crisis period. The immediate food crisis has passed. Of course there are vagaries of climate and vagaries of harvest every year. That is true all over Africa.

O'HALLORAN: I don't understand your suggestion that the crisis in Lesotho is really over. All the evidence we've heard contradicts that.

HUGHES: I don't think I said that. And also I think one needs to look at ...

O'HALLORAN: It was the impression you gave.

HUGHES: I think one needs to look at an involvement in a country over a long period. Christian Aid does not believe in handouts. Christian Aid does not believe in flying in and flying out over night. We're looking at long term processes of change and we are very pleased with the results of the programme that we have been supporting in Lesotho.

O'HALLORAN: It is not just a series of natural disasters in Lesotho that have created work for charities. One of the groups funded by Christian Aid has also been helping farming families who allege their lives have been blighted by a gigantic engineering project carried out by international firms - one of the biggest schemes ever seen in Africa. Its scale was bold and ambitious – but there has been a downside.

ACTUALITY AT BLUE MOUNTAIN PASS

O'HALLORAN: We have driven about two hours from the capital, up winding roads, to the Blue Mountain pass here, which is set at more than 2,600 metres or about 9,000 feet. And set among the ridges and mountain peaks ahead of me is a massive lake. That lake was created by the construction of the Mohale Dam, the second in a series of dams in a huge water project begun eighteen years ago.

ACTUALITY OF COW BELLS

O'HALLORAN: These people are farmers with sheep, cattle and they grow crops in the fields. For many, the effect on their homes, their farms and their livelihoods has been enormous.

KHAMA [VIA INTERPRETER]: I have lost everything that I used to live on. My family is worse off now than it was before. I had a way of living which I have totally lost at this new place.

O'HALLORAN: We found 66 year old Nkopane Khama living near the giant reservoir created by the water project. His former land and home had been inundated. In return he'd been given a smallholding at higher altitude. His is one of hundreds of families who've been displaced or lost land because of the scheme. The guarantee made to them many years ago was that no family would come out of it worse off than before. But Nkopane Khama says that pledge has not been honoured.

KHAMA [VIA INTERPRETER]: They promised that they would give us compensation that would make our lives much better off, but when we came here it was not the same as what they had promised. I used to plant spinach, cabbage, beetroot and all other vegetables that are grown locally, and I was quite content with my lifestyle then, because I could have enough money through selling the produce.

O'HALLORAN: How much land did you get up here compared with the amount of land you had before?

KHAMA [VIA INTERPRETER]: I used to have three fields in my original place and have lost one and the garden, so now I only have two fields and no garden land. The promise of a better lifestyle has not been delivered.

O'HALLORAN: The irony of the Highland Scheme – in a country where water is so often in short supply – is that it delivers water to South Africa. From that, Lesotho gets an income of around £25 million a year. The scheme also supplies most of Lesotho's electric power needs. It's also brought roads and tourism to a once remote region. But the project also swamped a lot of good farming land. We were told nine hundred families had suffered losses. A lower figure – of only a few hundred – is given by the Lesotho government. The man who represents it on the Lesotho Highlands Water Commission, Sixtus Tholang, says opinion on the scheme among mountain farmers is divided.

THOLANG: In any development at all there are people who will say that the development has affected them negatively, and there will be those who say it has affected them positively. This is why we have what we call a grievance procedure, so that these people who maintain that they have been negatively impacted and they have not been adequately compensated, they are on the register such that their complaints can be looked at and reviewed.

O'HALLORAN: And what you are doing now suggests that you believe a number of people are not as well off as they were before.

THOLANG: Yes, there are such people, yes, I agree.

O'HALLORAN: What would you say to a man we met the other day, who had been directly impacted? He was a grandfather, he lost a field and a garden, and he feels much worse than he did before. He wrote letters for three years and he has never had a single reply.

THOLANG: There are scores of people who have gone to the minister complaining, and those people have had to be dealt with and in the event that this is one of those people whom unfortunately maybe the project missed, then I'll be more than happy to see to see what can be done.

O'HALLORAN: A significant part of your rural economy was badly damaged up there in the Highlands, was it now?

THOLANG: I'm not sure what you base that on.

O'HALLORAN: It was a very productive, fertile region, that, wasn't it? Some of the most productive land in the country.

THOLANG: Not really, we did lose some productive land, but we cannot say it's the most productive land in the country.

O'HALLORAN: The power from the Highlands Water Project has, of course, been useful to industry. While farming's been in crisis, industry has done better. Especially textiles, which went into headlong expansion at the end of the 1990s. As Asian entrepreneurs moved in, garment factories sprang up, hiring more than fifty thousand people. The industry cashed in on a weak currency and on American trade preferences, which allowed African countries unfettered access to the huge US retail clothing market.

ACTUALITY AT GARMENT FACTORY

O'HALLORAN: The Lesotho Precious Garments factory in Maseru was part of the overnight success story. In its workshops, hundreds of women from the countryside have found their working lives transformed. To many, this gruelling work on the shop floor seemed better than trying to scratch a living in the fields, as drought and crop failure took their toll. The Taiwanese boss of this plant, John Leu, set up the company five years ago.

LEU: We have four thousand.

O'HALLORAN: Four thousand workers in this whole plant. And what about this particular room here?

LEU: This particular room, we have around five hundred.

O'HALLORAN: And they're all making different coloured items here. We've got yellow cloth over there being worked on, we've got green in front of us, orange down there. What sort of garments are they making?

LEU: They are making t-shirts.

O'HALLORAN: These are shirts for Gap, by the look of the label, polo shirts, as you call them. How many of those shirts do you turn out a day in this room on its own?

LEU: Around 700 dozen.

O'HALLORAN: So every day you turn out 700 dozen – about 8,000 shirts – in this room alone?

LEU: Yes, yes.

O'HALLORAN: The United States has pointed proudly to the textiles boom in Lesotho as an example of the good it's been doing for Africa. Tony Blair has praised it as a case of what trade, and not just aid, can do for a developing country. But this apparent textiles miracle was built on shifting sands. As the dollar has weakened and the South African rand, to which Lesotho's currency is tied, has strengthened, the clothes made here have shot up in price in America. And last month, a big change in world trade rules allowed Asian garment makers to export to the States free of quotas, thereby destroying much of Lesotho's competitive advantage.

ACTUALITY ON INDUSTRIAL ESTATE

O'HALLORAN: The expansion of the garment industry in Lesotho was rapid and exciting, but it's now been hit by dramatic and shocking closures, several of them here on Maseru, the capital's industrial estate. I'm standing in front of one of the factories that's recently closed, and its gates are firmly shut, it's padlocked with a chain. And the workers here, as in several other factories, got no warning that the factory was closing. They got no severance payments or terminal benefits.

RADEBE: I was earning 650 per month.

O'HALLORAN: 650 rand a month?

RADEBE: Yes.

O'HALLORAN: That's about \$100 a month or about £60 a month at current rates.

RADEBE: Yes.

O'HALLORAN: How important was that income for you?

RADEBE: It was very important to earn that money, because I was supporting my family - my mother, my young son and my five younger sisters.

O'HALLORAN: The job that 28 year old Mary Radebe found as a garment machinist was a godsend. Before that, when she lived in the countryside, her parents couldn't grow enough food to feed the family. But a few weeks ago, Mary and her fellow workers were given shocking news, the day before the long Christmas and New year holidays.

RADEBE: The last day of the payment, they gave us our salary and they told us one by one, this is the end of the work, you cannot come to work next year.

O'HALLORAN: What happened when you went home to your village and told your family that your job was over and there would be no more wages?

RADEBE: My mother was just crying. Even now they were expecting me to go home by month end to give them something. But I didn't go home, because I don't have money to go home right now.

O'HALLORAN: You don't even have money to travel back to the village?

RADEBE: Yes.

O'HALLORAN: In total, over the last eight months, about ten thousand textile jobs have been swept away, showing how badly a small African country can be buffeted by international forces far from its borders. For factory owner, John Leu, and tens of thousands of workers the outlook is bleak.

What is this going to really mean for jobs in Lesotho, do you think?

LEU: It gives us a lot of panic.

O'HALLORAN: You're in panic now?

LEU: Yes. We don't know what are going to happen, because the order is reducing now.

O'HALLORAN: The orders are going down?

LEU: Yes, going down. Now I'm thinking it is very bad. If this situation keeps going, we'll lose another 40,000.

O'HALLORAN: So if this situation continues, you could lose most of the remaining garment jobs in Lesotho?

LEU: Yes.

O'HALLORAN: How soon could you lose these jobs?

LEU: I think June or July ... going to happen.

O'HALLORAN: So by June or July you could lose tens of thousands of jobs? You could lose most of the garment industry here in Lesotho?

LEU: Yes, yes.

O'HALLORAN: If Lesotho does see most of its garment industry being wiped out, Foreign Minister Monyane Moleleki says the whole purpose of the American trade preferences designed to help African countries will have been defeated.

MOLELEKI: When you're assisting people, you have to have consistency, give them time to stand on their feet, so to speak, and we didn't have enough time to learn to run, we had just started to learn walking and the floodgates were opened too soon for us to adjust. We needed for twenty years, twenty-five years for that kind of period for us to find our feet and even begin to diversify our economy.

O'HALLORAN: But wouldn't twenty or twenty-five years of preferential treatment really by the United States or any other area in the world run totally counter to the whole trend of globalisation and removal of trade barriers?

MOLELEKI: It's very difficult but either you are serious about assisting or you are paying lip service to it.

O'HALLORAN: Even as the Lesotho government has tried to enlist the world's attention and its help, it's been confronted with more evidence that international priorities are moving elsewhere.

ACTUALITY AT BRITISH HIGH COMMISSION

O'HALLORAN: In troubled times, it's come as a fresh blow to the Lesotho government to hear that the British High Commission, a modern functional building in attractive gardens set here in a leafy lane near the centre of the capital, is to close its doors at the end of this year. It's one of three British missions in Africa to be shut down. The timing of the announcement has been, to say the least, awkward, coming at a time when both the Prime Minister, Tony Blair, and the Chancellor, Gordon Brown, are insisting that helping poor African countries is at the top of Britain's international agenda. And the decision has caused dismay and disappointment among Lesotho government ministers.

MOLELEKI: It was a terrible thing to have this stab in the back from such a long traditional friend like Great Britain to Lesotho, you know, we've had relations for over a hundred years.

O'HALLORAN: Although Britain is only the latest in a long line of countries to close their diplomatic missions here, for Foreign Minister, Monyane Mileleki, it is the most bitter blow of all. The more humiliating because it's said to be the first time a British High Commission has been closed in a Commonwealth country. The same will happen in Swaziland. And the embassy in Madagascar will also be axed.

MOLELEKI: On the one hand here is Prime Minister Tony Blair saying that he's looking to Africa, to support Africa during the British Presidency of the G8. On the other hand he's closing up missions, that's unfortunate. So I would appeal to the British Government to have another look at this, so that the actions don't sound a discordant note with the promise of Prime Minister, Tony Blair. I mean, the recent visit of Chancellor Gordon Brown to Southern Africa, that brought hope; on the other hand, the closure of these missions here doesn't bring much hope.

O'HALLORAN: You are suggesting there is some inconsistency there?

MOLELEKI: Yes, that's right. And that's a perception that one has.

O'HALLORAN: So closing the High Commission is sending the wrong message?

MOLELEKI: It's sending the wrong signal, yes.

O'HALLORAN: British officials in Maseru told us the UK's bilateral aid to Lesotho of about £5 million a year would be continuing. But the Foreign Office rejected our request to interview a minister about the High Commission closure and UK policy towards the region in the Year of Africa. The difficulty for Lesotho and many of its African neighbours is that their problems seem so intractable. Drought and crop failure repeated year after year soon become old news. Donor fatigue sets in. And so does donor distraction, as giant waves sweep virtually all other disasters from the screen. If the Year of Africa is to have real meaning for the people it's meant to assist, it surely requires some fast practical help, as well as the big ideas - like the ambitious British plans for debt relief and building up trade - which may take many years to deliver.

SIGNATURE TUNE