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Twenty Years of the British Anti-Apartheid Movement

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I bring you greetings - on the occasion of the twentieth anniversary of the Anti-Apartheid Movement - from the United Nations Centre against Apartheid and from the Special Committee against Apartheid which has warmly welcomed this event and had intended to send a delegation here.

The Special Committee and the Anti-Apartheid Movement have both been established in response to the needs and requests of the national liberation movement.

They have both recognised that the primary role in the struggle for liberation belongs to the national liberation movement, and that their own work is supportive.

They have both tried to build broadest support to the liberation struggle -irrespective of differences on any other issues.

They have both moved ahead in response to the changing requirements of the struggle, overcoming all distractions and pressures. Their work has been totally complementary.

The United Nations and the Organisation of African Unity - together with anti-apartheid movements, especially in countries which continue to collaborate with the apartheid regime - form the core of the solidarity movement which today has to meet immense challenges.

The Special Committee has for a long time recognised the Anti-Apartheid Movement as the conscience of the British people and as an indispensable ally of the United Nations.

It began effective co-operation with the Anti-Apartheid Movement soon after its own establishment in 1963. It has not only consulted the Movement on numerous occasions and sent representatives to its meetings, but has repeatedly invited representatives of the Movement to its own meetings, seminars and conferences. Several of the leaders of the Movement were honoured guests of the Special Committee and of the Nigerian Government at the World Conference for Action against Apartheid held in Lagos in August 1977.

Even more important, many of the initiatives of the Special Committee have resulted from consultations with the Anti-Apartheid Movement.

We have co-operated on numerous campaigns - from the World Campaign for the Release of South African Political Prisoners at the time of the Rivonia Trial in 1963-64 to the recent launching of the World Campaign against Military and Nuclear Collaboration with South Africa.

Three months ago, the Special Committee organised an important seminar on nuclear collaboration with South Africa in co-operation with the Anti-Apartheid Movement and in the next few months another important seminar on the role of Transnational Corporations in southern Africa will be organised by the Movement, at the request and in co-operation with the Special Committee

I will not reminisce on the past, but I must pay tribute to the Anti-Apartheid Movement for its valuable and consistent support to the efforts of the United Nations in the cause of African liberation.

Indeed, ever since 1968, the United Nations General Assembly and the Council of Ministers of the OAU have repeatedly and formally commended the activities of the anti-apartheid movements. So has the Non-aligned Movement.

I must, in particular, express our great appreciation to the many leaders of the Anti-Apartheid Movement whom we have known and come to respect - people like Bishop Ambrose Reeves, Barbara Castle, David Steele, Joan Lestor, Jeremy Thorpe, David Ennals, Bob Hughes and Abdul Minty - as well as its officials from Dorothy Roberts, Rosalynde Ainslee and Ethel de Keyser to Mike Terry and his colleagues.

In paying tribute to the Anti-Apartheid Movement, we cannot but pay tribute to the national liberation movement of South Africa - one of the noblest movements of this century, and a pioneer, an inspirer and often a guide to other liberation movements.

It is the righteousness of its struggle, and the heroism and sacrifices of its militants which have inspired a world-wide solidarity movement.

Where else can one find nobler documents of freedom than in the programmes of the South African liberation movement? Where else can one find more inspiring epics of freedom struggle than in the Defiance Campaign of 1952 and the defiance of children after Soweto - not to go back to the Battle of Isandhlawana in the last century?

But I would like to point out that if the liberation movement has its numerous martyrs, the solidarity movement too has its own share of heroes.

Hundreds and thousands of people in many countries have gone to jail, or have been subjected to assaults by the police or racists, or risked their careers, not to speak of the sacrifices of their time and money because of their convictions. I believe that on this occasion, we must also pay tribute to them, and be inspired by them.

The movement of solidarity with the South African people has a long history.

The Pan African Movement - at its very inception here in London in 1900 - called for international support to the rights and aspirations of the African people of South Africa.

A solidarity movement developed in India long before the Indian Government raised the South African problem in international forums in 1946.

Freedom in South Africa was a major concern of the Garvey movement in the United States and the Caribbean in the 1920s. The struggle in South Africa was the foremost concern of the International Committee, later renamed Council on African Affairs, established by Paul Robeson in 1937, until it was paralysed during the cold war in 1951.

I recall my own participation in a demonstration in front of the South African Consulate in New York in 1946 - under the leadership of Paul Robeson and Dr. W.E.B. Du Bois - to protest the bloody suppression of the African mine labour strike and the pegging act against the

Indian community. It took place during the visit of a delegation of the African National Congress, led by its President, Dr. Xuma, to the United Nations.

One can cite many other antecedents to the Anti-Apartheid Movement - most notably the Defence and Aid Fund led by the Reverend Canon L. John Collins, and the tireless labours of people like Lord Fenner Brockway.

But I believe that the Anti-Apartheid Movement - relatively young as it is, has had a special role. Its experience in Britain, as well as the experiences of similar movements which developed in many other countries, provide useful lessons for future action.

I would like to recall briefly the situation in 1959 when this movement was launched.

It was a time when the liberation movement - after the Defiance Campaign, the Congress of the People, the Women's anti-pass agitation and the resistance against forced removals - was subjected to severe repression through the notorious Treason Trial and the banning orders under the so-called Suppression of Communism Act.

The liberation movement had spread throughout the country, in the cities as well as the reserves, and had earned the right to recognition as the authentic representative of the people. But the apartheid regime was determined to stifle it by repression, and disorganise the people through the creation of so-called homelands under headmen and chiefs.

At the same time, driven by cold war calculations, the major Western Powers had reinforced their links with the apartheid regime. The Simonstown Agreements had been concluded only a few years earlier.

The Western media had constantly tried to libel the liberation movement with the communist label.

It was in that context that the liberation movement appealed for support of decent men and women abroad - particularly to deprive the apartheid regime of its external support.

The sanctions resolutions of the Conferences of Independent African States and of African peoples, organised by the late Dr. Kwame Nkrumah, were the African response.

The Anti-Apartheid Movement here, with its boycott campaign, was the response in the West, and it helped establish anti-apartheid and solidarity groups in many other countries.

The response from the United Nations was to come soon - with the 1962 General Assembly resolution on sanctions, which established the Special Committee against Apartheid.

The sanctions campaign was thus launched at a time when the liberation movement was obliged by the apartheid regime to take the fateful decision to go beyond non-violent and legal struggle.

Today, twenty years later, we face a new situation, after the tremendous escalation of repression and resistance. Will the international community enable the liberation movements of southern Africa to destroy the racist regimes and emancipate the whole of the African continent - or will external forces allow the apartheid regime to bring about a wider conflict?

The new stage of the crisis in southern Africa, and of the liberation struggle, requires new strategies.

The United Nations and its Special Committee have called for an international mobilisation against apartheid - to isolate the apartheid regime and to lend full support to the national liberation movement, so that apartheid can be destroyed and the threat to the peace averted. They have made this call after consultation with the anti-apartheid movement and other public organisations.

I will only make some general comments on the international context.

In the past twenty years, as the solidarity movement developed at the governmental and non-governmental level, the situation in South Africa itself has grown from bad to worse.

There has been a great intensification of racist domination; the establishment of bantustans; a series of obnoxious repressive laws; the massacres of Sharpeville and Soweto; the executions of patriots from Vuyisile Mini to Solomon Mahlangu; and the tortures and killings of eminent leaders in detention.

There has been a tremendous military build-up, accompanied by numerous acts of aggression against independent African States. There is now the imminent danger of acquisition of nuclear capability by the apartheid regime.

Some people tend to feel despondent that the solidarity activities have been in vain. I believe that is very wrong. We should not underestimate the tremendous victories of the international campaign against apartheid.

The unanimous condemnation of apartheid by the international community -however hypocritical or superficial in the case of some - is of no small significance.

The arms embargo against South Africa, the funds for assistance to the oppressed people and the international convention against apartheid have hardly any precedents in history.

Here, in the United Kingdom, the abrogation of the Simonstown Agreements -essentially because of public pressure - was not an insignificant achievement.

I see the "Muldergate scandal," above all, as a tribute to the international campaign, and a sign of decadence in the apartheid regime.

We must recognise the growth of the anti-apartheid forces in the past twenty years and of their potential strength, if they are mobilised and concerted. Africa is no more a colonial preserve.

The climate in Western European countries is very different from that in 1959 when they were still fighting colonial wars or had not become reconciled to the loss of colonies.

Even the major Western Powers are conscious that their economic interests in independent Africa are more important than their stake in apartheid.

Ever since the debacle of the apartheid regime and the Western secret services in Angola, and especially since the Soweto massacre, there have been frantic attempts to stem the tide of revolution in southern Africa. The recent trends in some Western countries, and the resurgence of racist lobbies, are certainly a cause for concern.

It seems that some powerful politicians here and in the United States would like to hitch the future of their countries to the fortunes of the

apartheid regime, and violate solemn commitments in the United Nations.

We must, of course, persist in our efforts to persuade everyone to join the campaign against apartheid.

But the struggle for liberation cannot wait until all the racists, the militarists and the profiteers from apartheid see the light. The anti-apartheid forces must be mobilised to block the overt and covert alliances with apartheid.

Public opinion in the Western countries must be made aware that the forces which seek to cement links with apartheid are a menace to the future of their own countries. They endanger the survival of the Commonwealth, weaken the United Nations, risk the growing economic relations with African countries and create a gulf between their countries and vast regions of the world.

They are also building a Frankenstein which may well become a menace to themselves, as Nazism was exactly forty years ago.

Twenty years is a short time, but these past twenty years have been too long a time for the oppressed people of South Africa to suffer increasing tyranny while other African countries became free. It is too long a time for the non-fulfilment of the decisions of the United Nations.

But perhaps no time is lost. Twenty or thirty years ago, the African people asked for little more than consultation by their rulers, the abrogation of some racist laws, and the beginnings of a move towards democracy.

Today, they are struggling for much more - the total destruction of the apartheid system and the transfer of power to the people.

The time lost will be made up in the speed and extent of transformation of the South African society.

Solomon Mahlangu, who was born around the same time as the Anti-Apartheid Movement, has become symbolic of the spirit of the liberation movement today. His last testament calls on us to rally all the potential strength of anti-apartheid forces - among the governments, in the trade unions and churches, in the campuses, among the communities of African origin all over the world - and wield it for a decisive confrontation with apartheid and its allies.

The United Nations, the OAU and the anti-apartheid movements will need to retool their strategies and structures, in co-operation with the liberation movements, for this international mobilisation against apartheid.