South Africa: Liberation and Reconciliation –
Role of International Solidarity

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The tenth anniversary of the democratic elections in South Africa, and the end of apartheid rule,
is being observed by people of many other countries because people around the world marched
with the South African people in the long struggle that led to those elections and to a new South
Africa. They abhorred the inhumanity of apartheid and were inspired by the vision of the South
African leaders. As Oliver Tambo, the President of the African National Congress in the most
difficult and crucial years of the struggle, used to stress, they became “partners” in the struggle.

The day when millions of people stood in line for hours in South Africa to cast the vote for the
first time in their lives was a great day for the world. It represented the emancipation of the
continent of Africa after centuries of humiliation, and the virtual end of the era of colonialism in
world history.

The empires of Britain, France, Portugal, Holland, Belgium, Spain, Russia and the United States,
which covered much of the globe, and kept half of humanity in subjugation, are no more -
because of the struggles of the oppressed nations and the support they received from outside,
including especially support from decent people in the nations that oppressed them. Regrettably,
numerous men, women and children had to lay down their lives in some countries – a million in
Indonesia, almost two million in Algeria and even more in Vietnam.

South African “miracle”

One of the longest and most bitter struggles has been in South Africa where Great Britain
transferred power in 1910 to the white settlers who proceeded to exploit and oppress the black
people without any restraint.

Since 1948, the country was ruled by the National Party, the party of so-called “apartheid”,
which proclaimed that 87 percent of the country is a “white area” belonging to 15 percent of the
population, and that Africans had no rights in the “white area”, no right even to be in the area
except to minister to the needs of the whites. There was naturally growing resistance by the
blacks and an escalation of repression by the white regime.

Many governments were concerned that this situation might lead to a race war, with wide
international repercussions. Thirteen Asian and Arab countries asked the United Nations to
consider the “racial conflict” resulting from apartheid. If two million people had to sacrifice their
lives for the freedom of Algeria where there were a million white settlers, people wondered how
many Africans had to die before there was freedom in South Africa with almost four million whites.

South African people paid a heavy price, but there was no race war and the total number of people killed in the struggle was far less than feared.

Freedom took a long time but it came with a negotiated settlement and democratic elections. The African National Congress, under the leadership of Nelson Mandela, who had spent twenty-seven and a half years in prison, proceeded to promote national reconciliation and set up a national unity government which included the National Party, the party of the erstwhile oppressors.

This has been hailed as the South African “miracle” and a miracle it was.

The credit for the miracle belongs to the African National Congress and its leaders. It also belongs to all those around the world who supported the struggle and, we might add, a few leaders of the apartheid regime who finally saw the writing on the wall.

**Contribution of the international solidarity movement**

The international solidarity movement comprised the great majority of the governments of the world and international organizations such as the United Nations, the Non-aligned Movement and the Organization of African Unity, as well as the people of the world as individuals and as members of non-governmental organizations.

In this international concert against racism, the action of the people of the major Western Powers was of supreme importance since it was these countries which could exert the greatest pressure on the South African government and avert a bloodbath. People in the United States – churchmen and women, trade unionists, legislators, African-Americans, writers and artistes, sportspersons and students – made a signal contribution to this international solidarity.

International support, I think, was crucial in enabling the liberation movement and its leaders to remain firm on the principle of non-racialism, in combating racial hatred and reverse racism, and in minimizing the loss of life in the course of the liberation struggle.

There were many occasions which were to provoke intense bitterness and anger among the black people – the torture and killing of their political activists and exiles; the shooting of hundreds of schoolchildren in peaceful demonstrations; and the mass arrests and detentions, including hundreds or thousands of children. I remember occasions when even some veterans of the ANC felt that retaliation in kind could not be avoided.

It was easy to kill in South Africa – to throw a bomb in a movie theatre, for instance - and create panic. But the leaders of the ANC rejected hatred of whites and violence against civilians. They were listened to.
How could the South African people hate all whites when they saw that the Nordic and other
governments – as white as they come – as well as tens of thousands of citizens in Western
countries were contributing millions of dollars to assist political prisoners and their families in
South Africa; when the “white” countries were boycotting South African sports teams – 500
Australians, 2000 New Zealanders and many more Britons went to prison during such boycotts;
when 5,000 Americans spent a night in prison in the Free South Africa movement from 1984;
when the churches of the world denounced the Dutch Reformed Churches of South Africa for
“heresy” in supporting apartheid?

Pioneers of the Solidarity Movement

This people’s movement in support of liberation of South Africa was a movement with a long
history and spread to all regions of the world. It was one of the most significant public
movements of the twentieth century.

Before the end of the Second World War a few people in Britain and the United States, and a few
organizations, denounced the injustice in South Africa– I have particularly in mind Fenner
Brockway in Britain, and the great African-American leaders, Dr. W.E.B. Du Bois and Marcus
Garvey in the United States – but there was no organized solidarity movement.

At that time, brutality and massacres against Africans were hardly ever reported by the media in
the West and no one seemed to care about black people being killed in South Africa or in the
colonies.

The solidarity movement developed shortly after the end of the Second World War in response
to the mass nonviolent struggles in South Africa – the passive resistance by the Indian
community in 1946; the African miners’ strike in August 1946; and especially the Campaign of
Defiance against Unjust Laws, launched by the African National Congress and the South African
Indian Congress in June 1952 in which 8,000 people of all racial origins courted imprisonment.

● Paul Robeson, Dr. Martin Luther King

I must pay special tribute to Paul Robeson who was a pioneer in promoting international
solidarity with the struggle of the people of South Africa.

He was a victim of the cold war for many years, but I am glad that the curtain of silence has been
removed and the United States Postal Service has issued a postage stamp this year to honor this
great American and world citizen.

The pioneering role of Paul Robeson and the Council on African Affairs he headed – and of his
associates, Dr. W. E. B. Du Bois and Dr. Alphaeus Hunton – to the movement of solidarity with
the people of South Africa and Namibia deserves to be better known.

I had the privilege of their friendship. I met the leaders of the South African struggle at the
offices of the Council in November 1946 and joined a demonstration organized by the Council in
front of the South African Consulate in New York.
Another great American who contributed to the solidarity movement was the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. He lent his support to the American Committee on Africa and joined with Chief Luthuli in 1962 to call for international sanctions against apartheid.

I recall that for many years after the Soweto massacre in 1976, students in many American universities used to observe the two weeks from the Sharpeville Day on 21 March and the anniversary of the assassination of Dr. King, Jr., on April 6, as “two weeks of action against apartheid.”

● Churchmen

Among the pioneers who helped arouse the conscience of the West to its responsibility were many churchpeople – including some who had served in South Africa and had been expelled for their sympathy with the Africans – like the Reverend Michael Scott, Father Trevor Huddleston, Canon L. John Collins and Bishop Ambrose Reeves in Britain, Rev. Gunnar Helander in Sweden, Professor J. Verkuyl in the Netherlands and George Houser in the United States.

As a result of their efforts, committees were formed to publicize the situation in South Africa and support the movement for freedom. They sent modest assistance to the ANC during the Defiance Campaign in 1952. When all the top leaders of the ANC were detained in 1956 and charged with high treason, they collected substantial funds from the public for their legal defense and for assistance to their families.

Internationalization of the issue

The issue of racist oppression in South Africa was internationalized in 1946 when the matter was placed on the agenda of the United Nations General Assembly during mass struggles in South Africa. India complained to the United Nations about the treatment of Indians in South Africa when the Indian community defied a new “ghetto act” and two thousand Indians, as well as some Africans and whites, went to prison in a non-violent passive resistance campaign. India also helped defeat the South African request to the United Nations to allow it to annex Namibia. The brutal suppression of the African mine labor strike in August 1946 provoked condemnation abroad.

In 1952, during the Campaign of Defiance against Unjust Laws, the General Assembly decided, at the request of Asian-African countries, to take up the broader problem of apartheid.

Resolutions were passed annually appealing to the South African regime to abandon its course, but were consistently defied by that regime. The number of votes for these resolutions increased from year to year. Even major Western Powers which had a large economic stake in South Africa and valued South Africa as a reliable ally in the cold war, criticized apartheid even while preventing condemnation of the South African regime or any sanctions. The development of the solidarity movement in the Western countries was beginning to have an effect.
Boycott campaign and Anti-Apartheid Movements

As the South African government proceeded to close all avenues for peaceful protest and peaceful change, the African National Congress appealed to the world for a boycott of South African goods and an end to the supply of arms to South Africa.

This gave a focus to the solidarity movement which spread to many countries after the world was shocked by the massacre of peaceful demonstrators in Sharpeville on March 21, 1960.

Anti-Apartheid movements were formed under different names and worked tirelessly to boycott South African goods, isolate the South African government and its supporters, and give political and material support to the liberation struggle. They provided a platform for the leaders of the ANC, many of whom had been forced into exile. They lobbied and confronted their governments, and tried to persuade trade unions, churches and other organizations to take action.

In many Western countries, anti-apartheid activists faced strong opposition and even suffered persecution and violence. They needed determination to continue the struggle for more than 30 years.

The movement ultimately encompassed many segments of the population, and involved a broad range of actions. South Africa was excluded from numerous international organizations and conferences. There were consumer boycotts – of South African oranges and wines. There were campaigns against banks which made loans to South Africa. Funds were set up to assist South African political prisoners and their families, to provide scholarships to students, to assist refugees and to help the liberation movement.

Sports boycott

The campaign that involved millions of people and which had a tremendous educational effort was the sports boycott. Students and youth were in the vanguard of this campaign. Thousands of people were arrested in Britain, Australia and New Zealand and hundreds were beaten by the police.

Apartheid became a national issue in countries which had sporting relations with white South Africa.

Many sportspersons made great sacrifices by refusing to play against South African teams, by withdrawing from the Montréal Olympics in 1976 (to protest against New Zealand’s collaboration with apartheid sport), or by boycotting sportspersons and teams which played in South Africa.

The successes in the sports boycott made it very clear to the whites in South Africa how much apartheid was detested around the world.

Eventually the pressure of sportspersons in South Africa helped significantly in the transition from apartheid to democratic rule.
Other actions

There was a campaign for an academic boycott and for a cultural boycott which, for instance, prohibited the showing of many television programs in South Africa and visits of musicians to South Africa.

About eighty of the greatest contemporary artists of the world contributed to an “art against apartheid” exhibit which toured several countries and was seen by millions of people.

Churches began to take action. The World Council of Churches adopted a Program to Combat Racism in the 1970s, despite strong opposition of some churches, and began to make substantial grants to the liberation movements.

Trade Unions agreed on a program of action against apartheid and forced the South African government to legalize black trade unions.

In the 1980s, in Britain and some European countries, hundreds of cities declared themselves anti-apartheid zones and took a series of anti-apartheid measures.

In the United States, after extensive campaigns by black caucuses and anti-apartheid groups, many states and cities decided to divest from corporations which had investments in South Africa. Trade unions, churches and numerous other institutions took similar action after intensive discussions.

These campaigns made millions of people aware of the issues.

The campaigns that provoked greatest opposition tended to receive the widest coverage in the media and lead to public debates; they had often a greater educational value than campaigns that were easy.

Nelson Mandela – the symbol

Nelson Mandela, in prison, became the symbol of the liberation struggle and the hero of the solidarity movement.

His statement from the dock during the Rivonia trial in April 1964 was a source of inspiration to anti-apartheid forces. He declared:

“During my lifetime I have dedicated myself to this struggle of the African people. I have fought against white domination, and I have fought against black domination. I have cherished the ideal of a democratic and free society in which all persons live together in harmony and with equal opportunities. It is an ideal which I hope to live for and to achieve. But if needs be, it is an ideal for which I am prepared to die.”

The campaign for the release of Mandela became a most effective demonstration of international solidarity.
No prisoner in history – in fact, no individual in history - has received so many honors and so much recognition all over the world as Nelson Mandela.

**Role of Students**

I must refer to the crucial role of the students in the anti-apartheid movement and its campaigns.

Student action began in Britain as early as the late 1940s, because of the close relations between Britain and South Africa. In the United States it came much later.

Students at the Union Theological Seminary and Cornell University, I remember, were involved in the campaign against bank loans to South Africa around 1964. Students for a Democratic Society also took up the issue of investments in South Africa and organized a large demonstration at the headquarters of a bank in New York, which led to many arrests and newspaper headlines.

But these actions were overshadowed for several years by the civil rights movement and the movement against the Vietnam War.

Large-scale student action began in the United States after the massacre of hundreds of peaceful student demonstrators in Soweto in June 1976. The main focus of the campaign was the demand for divestment of university funds from corporations which were involved in South Africa.

The students had done their home work. American investment in South Africa was estimated at $7 billion dollars in 1985 – and many American corporations also made large investments through their associates or subsidiaries in Britain and other countries. About half of the 500 largest American companies had affiliates in South Africa. The universities had large investments in these corporations, accounting perhaps to ten percent of their shares.

The demand of the students led to strong resistance by the administrations, especially of private colleges and universities which had large endowments. Their Boards of Trustees were composed of businessmen, most of whom had interests in South Africa. So the students found it necessary to carry on a militant campaign with teach-ins, sit-ins, vigils and other demonstrations.

They went into surrounding communities, and joined in community campaigns – for instance against banks selling South African Krugerrands - or in lobbying states, local authorities and pension funds to withdraw investments from corporations involved in South Africa.

Through their campaigns, the students were able to make investment in South Africa a major national issue and exert pressure on American companies. The corporations which had served as lobbies for South Africa were forced to defend themselves. The student community became a major component of the growing constituency for action against apartheid.

The campaign greatly expanded from 1985 when a state of emergency was declared in South Africa and tens of thousands of people, including children, were arrested.
A Free South Africa Movement came into existence in November 1984 when Randall Robinson of TransAfrica and two others staged a sit-in at the South African embassy in Washington, DC. It developed into a large passive resistance movement, largely because of participation by students.

I recall that hundreds of people from Connecticut – including all four Democratic Congressmen – arrived in New York in January 1985 to demonstrate in front of the South African Consulate-General. [They were not arrested; only demonstrations in front of the embassy in Washington were illegal.]

Universities in Connecticut were active in this campaign.

In 1985, 130 students were arrested at Wesleyan University for blocking administration buildings. By persisting in the campaign, the students were able to persuade the university to divest.

One of the innovations in the campaign at this time was the building of shanties on college campuses – to depict the hovels in which the African people lived in South Africa.

Shanties were built at Yale in front of the Beinecke Library in April 1986. The students defied orders to remove the shanties. When the Yale police dismantled the shanties, the students built them in front of the administration building, and camped there; 322 students were arrested during that spring term.

Many faculty members at universities joined the campaign. At Yale, 172 faculty members signed a petition calling for divestment.

There was some activity at UCONN too. The African Affairs Association, formed at the University in 1976, organized a vigil in 1977 and secured the ending of the sale of Krugerrand in greater Hartford. Because of the pressure by this organization for divestment, the Board of Trustees set up a study committee, including student representatives.

The United Nations Special Committee against Apartheid held three sessions with student leaders in 1978, 1979 and 1985 to encourage student action. A representative of the UCONN Committee appeared at one of the hearings.

**Shift in the balance of forces**

The result of these campaigns could be seen by 1984 when the balance of forces turned decisively against apartheid. A visit by the South African President, P.W. Botha, to Europe in 1984 – expecting the end of isolation – proved a disaster as he was greeted by unprecedented demonstrations.

In the United States millions of people were aroused when they saw on the TV pictures of police brutality during the state of emergency in South Africa.
The groundswell of public opinion led to the passage of the Comprehensive Anti-Apartheid Act in 1986. A large bipartisan coalition in the Congress supported the legislation. When President Reagan vetoed the legislation, despite appeals by Republican Senators who were concerned about the feelings in their constituencies, the veto was overwhelmingly defeated – by 308 to 77 in the House of Representatives and by 78 to 21 in the Senate.

The Anti-Apartheid Act was based mainly on legislation proposed by Senator Edward Kennedy of Massachusetts and Senator Lowell Weicker of Connecticut. It banned new investments in South Africa and new loans to South Africa. It prohibited the importation of steel, iron, coal, uranium, agricultural products and military supplies from South Africa, and export of a number of products including nuclear and computer technology to South Africa. It ended South Africa’s sugar quota and stopped landing rights to South African planes.

After the United States legislation, other Western countries and Japan were persuaded to take further action. Major banks had already stopped making loans to South Africa.

The whites in South Africa began to feel the economic impact of sanctions and many were unemployed.

Meanwhile, the mass democratic movement inside South Africa launched a nonviolent campaign to make apartheid inoperative. People had lost the fear of jail or police beatings, torture and even death.

The pressure from abroad, combined with resistance inside, led to rethinking in the National Party, the abrogation of bans on people's organizations, the release of Nelson Mandela and other prisoners, the return of political exiles and negotiations for a transition to democracy.

**Some lessons**

This public movement against apartheid is a precious heritage of the world. It was a struggle in which ordinary people, the grassroots, were able to counteract powerful interests and to force governments to change their policies – even to defeat governments which were unresponsive. A study of this movement is important for an understanding of the dynamics and power of nonviolent public action at local, national and international levels.

The anti-apartheid or solidarity movement was composed of thousands of groups in many countries and communities, many of them in opposition to the policies of their governments. They were not centrally directed. Each group was independent and acted in the light of conditions in its own country or constituency. There was no coordination – except that at various conferences (for instance, those organized by the United Nations), groups from different countries were able to meet each other, exchange views, and possibly plan international campaigns.

They had one thing in common - respect for the liberation movement, recognition that the liberation struggle was the prerogative of the South African people and that solidarity movements have to respect their choices. That enabled them to work on parallel lines.
This movement showed that when people are informed of the truth about gross violations of human rights, they will join in action to eliminate them and even make sacrifices for that purpose.

When the liberation movement and the anti-apartheid groups pressed for sanctions, major Western governments, echoing propagandists for South Africa, gave endless reasons why sanctions were not appropriate. They argued that sanctions and divestment would disrupt world trade, lead to large-scale unemployment in Western countries, hurt the blacks in South Africa and cause losses for the pension funds and university endowments. But numerous cities, states, trade unions and universities were persuaded to divest from South Africa and helped defeat apartheid.

That reinforces our faith in the innate goodness of humanity, and in people’s action as a powerful force for justice in international affairs.

I do not want to leave the impression that anti-apartheid movements alone changed the balance of forces against apartheid. They were a part of the alliance or concert which included most governments of the world; the United Nations and other inter-governmental organizations; and numerous non-governmental organizations. This concert of governments and peoples made possible the liberation of South Africa with little violence, and thereby facilitated national reconciliation.

Such a broad and action-oriented alliance is necessary and possible on issues on which most of the world is united and only a few powerful governments block necessary action.

People tend to leave foreign affairs to governments because they think the leaders of government have all the information and know better.

But on apartheid, with all its intelligence agencies and think tanks, the United States government was convinced in the 1970s that the black people in South Africa could never overthrow apartheid rule, and that there could be no change in South Africa in the twentieth century. That was one reason for the “tar baby” option. In the 1980s, it espoused “constructive engagement” with apartheid South Africa in the belief that change was only possible through the whites.

But the Nixon and Reagan administrations proved wrong, the people prevailed in this democracy, and the students who chose to support the liberation movement were vindicated.

Perhaps that provides a lesson – not to leave foreign affairs entirely to the government, but to participate in national discussion with faith in humanity and a commitment to uphold morality as the basis of enlightened policy.