

**TRIBUTE TO THE REVEREND DR. MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR.**

**STATEMENT BY AMBASSADOR LESLIE O. HARRIMAN (NIGERIA),  
CHAIRMAN, AT A SPECIAL MEETING OF THE UNITED NATIONS  
SPECIAL COMMITTEE AGAINST APARTHEID ON THE TENTH  
ANNIVERSARY OF THE ASSASSINATION OF REV. DR. MARTIN  
LUTHER KING, JR., APRIL 4, 1978**

Today, 4 April 1978, is the tenth anniversary of the assassination of the Reverend Martin Luther King, a great American, a great fighter for freedom and peace, and a friend of this Committee.

One of the first letters received by this Special Committee after its establishment in 1963 was from Dr. King who had co-sponsored with Chief Albert J. Lutuli - on Human Rights Day, 10 December 1962 - an "Appeal for Action against Apartheid". They said:

"We therefore ask all men of good will to take action against apartheid in the following manner:

Hold meetings and demonstrations on 10 December, Human Rights Day;

Urge your church, union, lodge or club to observe this day as one of protest;

Urge your Government to support economic sanctions;

Write to your Mission to the United Nations urging adoption of a resolution calling for international isolation of South Africa;

Don't trade or invest in South Africa;

Don't buy South Africa's products;

Translate public opinion into public action by explaining facts to all peoples, to groups to which you belong, and to countries of which you are citizens until an effective international quarantine of apartheid is established."

In recalling the memory of the late Dr. King, therefore, we recall not only a great leader of the black people in the United States of America but a leader in the international movement of solidarity with the oppressed people of South Africa and their national liberation movement.

Dr. King was always conscious of the bond between the struggle of the black people in his country and the wave of colonial revolutions in Asia, Africa and Latin America. He said in 1958:

"The determination of Negro Americans to win freedom from all forms of oppression springs from the same deep longing that motivates oppressed peoples all over the world. The rumblings of discontent in Asia and Africa are expressions of a quest for freedom and human dignity by people who have long been the victims of colonialism and imperialism. So in a real sense the racial crisis in America is a part of the larger world crisis."

He recognized the link between the struggle for human dignity and the struggle against poverty. Indeed, in the last days of his life, he was busy helping the sanitation workers of Memphis and preparing for a Poor People's March on Washington.

Dr. King saw at the same time that the oppressed people have a vital stake in peace and called for an end to the gruesome war in Vietnam. Dr. King not only preached but led tens of thousands of his people into heroic action against segregation and humiliation, for an end to poverty, and for peace. He lived and died for the purposes and principles of the United Nations and the noblest aspirations of humanity. Few greater men have set foot in this building than the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

### *Lessons from Dr. King's Life*

Dr. King was brutally assassinated on 4 April 1968 at the young age of thirty-nine, little more than twelve years after he entered public life by leading the bus boycott in Montgomery, Alabama. But his life has many lessons for us.

First, it teaches us that the struggle against racism - even at this stage when that evil is doomed to extinction, and when the nations of the world are pledged to eradicate it - can be no easy task. Dr. King himself was jailed a score of times, beaten and stabbed. His home was bombed and his family was constantly subjected to threats. His name was vilified by powerful forces, including even an agency of the United States Government. In the movement he led, non-violent though it was, his followers were subjected to savage brutality. His non-violence was met with violence - in fact he was victim of violence and of an assassin's bullet. The whole world shuddered at the sight of the Sheriff of Birmingham,

Alabama - Bill Connor - unleashing fire hoses and vicious police dogs against little children. We recall the bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham on 15 September 1963, in which four little black girls attending Sunday School were killed and 21 injured.

The national liberation movement in South Africa has learnt that its own struggle against racism will be no easy walk and has steeled the black people to pay the price of freedom.

Second, Dr. King has taught us that there can be no freedom without struggle and direct action by the oppressed people. Laws and resolutions alone can bring no meaningful change. This was true of the United States where the provisions of the Constitution were not implemented for a hundred years and the Supreme Court judgement of 1954 against school segregation remained a dead letter until the oppressed people fought to enforce it at great risk to themselves and their children. It is even more true in the case of South Africa where racism is a State policy of the minority regime. The national liberation movement of that country recognized that truth many years ago.

Third, Dr. King teaches us that the oppressed people must struggle now and must not wait until it is convenient for the oppressors or their accomplices.

In his historic "letter from the Birmingham jail" in April 1963, Dr. King confessed his total disappointment with the so-called "white moderates" who proved to be greater stumbling blocks in the stride of the black people toward freedom than the racists. They were always asking the black people to wait for a "more convenient season" and advising against direct action. We who have followed the situation in South Africa have also encountered the "white moderates" - not only those in South Africa, but their counterparts in the community of nations. Every time we call for action against apartheid, they find that the time is not convenient. Every time we call for sanctions against the apartheid regime, they find one excuse or another. If we wait for them, we wait for ever.

### ***Dr. King's Teachings and Actions in Relation to the Struggle in South Africa***

I must make reference to the attempts of some people to cite the teachings and actions of Dr. King in order to oppose the right of the South African national liberation movement to resort to armed struggle and to argue that multi-national corporations can play an important role in ending racism.

We who recognize the close inter-relationship between the struggle of the black people in the south of the United States of America and in the south of the continent of Africa know that the situations were not entirely identical. Dr. King

led a campaign of disobedience against unjust local laws which were in conflict with the constitution and the laws of the United States. The struggle in South Africa has been, on the other hand, a struggle against discrimination enshrined in the national constitution and legislation.

Dr. King had conceived his task as precipitating "creative tension" so that meaningful negotiations could take place. In South Africa, the oppressed people have carried on numerous similar campaigns at great sacrifice, but the apartheid regime has consistently refused negotiations because the end of racism involves the end of that regime and the system it represents. It has met protests and non-violent resistance by a constant escalation of violence. It has responded with brutal extermination even against women and children and against detainees in its custody.

It was under these circumstances and after a series of massacres that the national liberation movement felt obliged to abandon its strict adherence to non-violence. Chief Lutuli refused to condemn that decision, as did most votaries of non-violence around the world.

Then there is also the myth that economic interests had played a positive role in desegregating Birmingham and it is argued that *ipso facto* similar methods could lead to eliminate racism in South Africa. But the facts are that the approaches by Dr. King and his partisans to the business world in Birmingham were an utter failure. It was only when direct action of the oppressed people affected business - as, indeed, the struggle in South Africa since the Soweto massacre unnerved the investors - that the businessmen saw the handwriting on the wall and then attempted to save the situation.

The main force for change in Birmingham was the struggle of the black people and their white supporters which aroused public opinion all over the country - indeed, all over the world - and led to action by the Federal Government.

In the case of South Africa, it is only the struggle of the oppressed people - combined with effective international economic sanctions and an aroused world public opinion - which can bring liberation.

There can be no reliance on a "change of heart" among the multi-national corporations. They are deeply involved in the system of racist oppression. They are tied up with powerful State corporations of the apartheid regime. They depend on the regime for their super-profits. They cannot be the agents of change...

### ***Dr. King's Committed Empathy with the Oppressed***

In his short life, Dr. King helped bring about a historic transformation in his country. His contribution was recognized by all the oppressed people of the world and he became the youngest winner of the Nobel Peace Prize in 1964.

But the tasks to which Dr. King had lived and died - the elimination of racism, the abolition of poverty, the establishment of a just and lasting peace - remain. His life shall inspire the peoples of the world to redouble their efforts to reach those noble goals.

Addressing the March on Washington in August 1963, Dr. King said that, in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, the Founding Fathers of the United States had signed a promissory note to which every American was to fall heir. But America had defaulted on this sacred obligation and had given the black people a bad check. There would be no rest, no peace and no cooling off, he declared, until the obligation was honoured.

Let it not be said of the United Nations, which has affirmed the sacred principles in its Charter, that it too has given a bad check to the black people of South Africa and to the world.

The greatest virtue of Dr. King - to quote from his tribute to Dr. W.E.B. DuBois - was "his committed empathy with all the oppressed and his divine dissatisfaction with all forms of injustice." Dr. King continued:

"Let us be dissatisfied until every man can have food and material necessities for his body, culture and education for his mind, freedom and human dignity for his spirit... Let us be dissatisfied until our brothers of the Third World - Asia, Africa and Latin America - will no longer be the victim of imperialist exploitation, but will be lifted from the long night of poverty, illiteracy and disease."

As Mrs. Coretta Scott King said at the funeral of Dr. King:

"The day that Negro people and others in bondage are truly free, on the day `want' is abolished, on the day `wars' are no more, on that day, I know my husband will rest in a long-deserved peace."

May the soul of our great and beloved Dr. Martin Luther King rest in peace even though we are yet to achieve this goal of freedom of all human beings and be able to sing with him in his grave "we shall overcome".

May I now invite all to rise and observe a minute of silence in memory of the late Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King.