

TRIBUTE TO DR. WILLIAM E. BURGHART DuBOIS

STATEMENT BY AMBASSADOR LESLIE O. HARRIMAN (NIGERIA), CHAIRMAN, AT A SPECIAL MEETING OF THE UNITED NATIONS SPECIAL COMMITTEE AGAINST APARTHEID ON THE 110TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE BIRTH OF DR. W.E.B. DUBOIS, FEBRUARY 23, 1978

The Special Committee has convened this special meeting today, 23 February 1978, to pay tribute to Dr. DuBois for his historic contribution as the guide, the philosopher and the militant in the struggle against colonialism, racism and apartheid. It seeks to learn from the life of this great man of the century - a "titan" as he has been aptly described - in discharging its own duty to the oppressed people of South Africa. I may add that we have a further reason to recall the lives of Dr. DuBois and other leaders of the oppressed people.

For too long have we been fed with histories which glorify the colonialist and racist politicians and generals, the practitioners of "real-politik" and brinkmanship, the buccaneers and the robber barons, as the main actors in the affairs of humanity. The real moving forces of the history of the present century - the leaders in the struggle to emancipate the great majority of the people of the world from slavery, humiliation and exploitation - people like Mahatma Gandhi and Dr. DuBois, Kwame Nkrumah and Frantz Fanon, Jose Marti and Chief Lutuli - are ignored because they are the leaders of men and women, and not the wielders of power. The time has come to recognize that people count more than guns and that it is the liberators who have laid the foundations for genuine international co-operation. And the best place to do that is the United Nations which is the mirror of the emergence of the new world order.

THE COLOUR LINE AS THE PROBLEM OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

This century unfolded with the prophetic warning by Dr. DuBois that "the problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the colour line - the relation of the darker to the lighter races of men in Asia and Africa, in America and the islands of the sea".

Dr. DuBois spent his whole life - which stretched from the end of the American Civil War to the founding of the Organization of African Unity - in the struggle to destroy that colour line which manifested itself as colonialism and Jim Crow, as neo-slavery and apartheid, against the people of darker skins. He was a participant in the Universal Races Congress in London in July 1911, and the organizer of five Pan African Congresses from 1919 to 1945.

As Dr. Martin Luther King said:

"He [Dr. DuBois] symbolized in his being his pride in the black man...

"He was proud of his people, not because their colour endowed them with some vague greatness but because their concrete achievements in struggle had advanced humanity and he saw and loved progressive humanity in all its hues - black, white, yellow, red and brown."

Dr. DuBois struggled with an unbounding faith that the future will be determined by the oppressed people and not by the oppressors, because their cause is just and because they are the great majority of the human race. He wrote in 1915:

"Most men in this world are coloured. A belief in humanity means a belief in coloured men. The future world will, in all reasonable possibility, be what coloured men make it.,,"

DR. DUBOIS AND THE PAN AFRICAN MOVEMENT

But in struggling for emancipation, Dr. DuBois and the Pan African movement were not fighting for the black and oppressed people alone, but for all humanity. As the great majority of humanity, they were the trustees for its future. They were fighting for a vision in which all men and women would be free.

Dr. DuBois wrote in the manifesto of the Niagara Movement in 1905 - in words which recall to mind the declarations of the South African liberation movement half a century later:

"We will not be satisfied to take one jot or tittle less than our full manhood rights. We claim for ourselves every single right that belongs to a free-born American, political, civil and social; and until we get these rights we will never cease to protest and assail the ears of America. The battle we wage is not for ourselves alone, but for all true Americans. It is a fight for ideals..."

This has been the vision of the black people for a long time, even in the days of slavery.

I recall the "Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World" by David Walker, a black freed man and anti-slavery worker in Boston, as long ago as 1829. He appealed to the Americans:

"We must and shall be free I say, in spite of you... Throw away your fears and prejudices then, and enlighten us and treat us like men, and we will like you more than we do now hate you. Treat us like men, and there is no danger but we will all live in peace and happiness together... What a happy country this will be, if the whites will listen... Treat us like men, and we will be your friends."

In paying homage to dR. DuBois today, we also honour the other great leaders of the Pan African Movement - H. Sylvester Williams, the Trinidad barrister, who convened the first Pan African Conference in London in 1900; Blaise Diagne of Senegal who helped arrange the Pan Africanist Congress of 1919 in Paris; dANTAS Bellegarde of Haiti, who conveyed the results of that Congress to the League of Nations; George Padmore, the moving spirit behind the Pan African Congress in Manchester in 1945; and many, many others.

They built the Pan African movement of freedom and international cooperation, as against the Pan Africanism of imperialists who dreamt of a colonial empire stretching from the Cape to Cairo.

We honour Dr. DuBois as a true patriot of the United States. He wrote in his autobiography:

"I know the United States. It is my country and the land of my fathers. I have served my country to the best of my ability... At the same time I have pointed out its injustices and crimes and blamed it, rightly I believe, for its mistakes..."

DR. DUBOIS AS AN INTERNATIONALIST

We honour Dr. DuBois as an internationalist. That is why he is respected far beyond the shores of the United States of America; not only in the Caribbean and Africa, but also in India, in the Soviet Union, which honoured him with its highest decoration, in China and in many other lands.

He recognized the indivisibility of the struggles of all oppressed peoples for liberation. He said in 1949:

"Every victory of the people of Asia is known throughout Africa. And what happens in Africa will affect my people in the United States and Brazil and other lands in the hemisphere."

He was a consistent champion of freedom of all colonies and, under his leadership, the fifth Pan African Congress in 1945 not only called for the freedom of Africa, but adopted resolutions demanding the freedom of India, Indonesia and Vietnam.

On DuBois' eightieth birthday, Prime Minister Nehru of India cabled him greetings declaring: "India remembers with gratitude your sympathy during her struggle for freedom."

As Paul Robeson, the disciple, friend and colleague of Dr. DuBois said:

"Dr. DuBois was... in the truest sense an American leader, a Negro leader, a world leader."

Dr. DuBois was instrumental in the adoption of the mandates system in the League of Nations - a recognition of international responsibility for the colonies.

At the San Francisco Conference in 1945 and in New York a year later, he seized the United Nations - when most of our countries were still under colonial domination - with the problem of emancipation from colonialism and racism.

He recalled that when he had pleaded in 1919, on behalf of the colonial peoples, the Congress of Versailles had paid no attention to them except as pawns to satisfy the greed of colonial Powers. "That is one reason why there is a San Francisco Conference," he said, and "why there followed the most devastating war humanity has ever known; and why the chief problem before San Francisco ought to be the future of the colonial system and of colonial peoples".

But his hopes were in vain.

DR. DUBOIS AS A MAN OF PEACE

We honour Dr. DuBois as a man of peace, who understood that lasting peace is inseparable from freedom. He wrote in 1915:

"We, then, who want peace, must remove the real causes of war... We must extend the democratic ideal to the yellow, brown and black peoples".

To those hypocrites under the mask of peace who condone the violence of the racists and call on the oppressed to confine themselves to non-violence, he replied, as early as 1906, in the tribute to John Brown, by making a clear distinction between the oppressors and the martyrs of the freedom struggle.

"We do not believe in violence, neither in the despised violence of the raid nor the lauded violence of the soldier, nor the barbarous violence of the mob; but we do believe in John Brown, in that incarnate spirit of justice, that hatred of a lie, that willingness to sacrifice money, reputation, and life itself on the altar of right".

The fifth Pan African Congress put the issue succinctly when it said that the delegates believed in peace and added:

"How could it be otherwise when for centuries the African peoples have been victims of violence and slavery? Yet if the Western World is still determined to rule mankind by force, then Africans, as a last resort, may have to appeal to force in the effort to achieve Freedom..."

HIS UNCOMPROMISING OPPOSITION TO RACISM

I am reminded that Dr. DuBois was "controversial" in his life. He was a revolutionary and he made enemies by his uncompromising opposition to any accommodation with racism, by his total rejection of exploitation of man by man, and by his condemnation of all imperialist and neo-colonialist manoeuvres in Africa. In his own country, he was even handcuffed and jailed in 1951, in the heyday of the cold war, for his chairmanship of the American Peace Information Centre. He was denied a passport to attend the independence celebrations of Ghana in 1957.

We admire him precisely because he was a revolutionary who strove to destroy the system of inequality and establish a new world order of human equality. This Special Committee, which is charged with promoting international action for the liberation of South Africa, cannot but pay special homage to Dr. DuBois for his constant denunciation of racism in South Africa and his espousal of the cause of the South African people.

He put the problem in a nutshell in an article in the Atlantic Monthly in May 1915 when he pointed out that, a century ago, the Africans had owned all but a morsel of land in South Africa. When the whites in South Africa were given power in 1910, they had less than a tenth of the land. The white racist regime even enacted laws to deny Africans the right to buy land.

He tore the mask of hypocrisy worn by pseudo-liberals in South Africa and exposed the truth in all its nakedness. His comments on Jan Christian Smuts of South Africa are memorable. For instance, in the declaration of the Pan African Congress in Lisbon in 1923, he asked:

"What more paradoxical figure today fronts the world than the official head of a great South African State striving blindly to build Peace and Good Will in Europe by standing on the necks and hearts of millions of black Africans?"

DR. DUBOIS' VISION AND FAITH

The most crucial battle of Pan African liberation is today being fought in South Africa by the black people under the leadership of their glorious liberation movement. Their path is lighted by the vision of Dr. DuBois - a vision of a world without prejudice and exploitation, a world without colonies and slavery, a world based on a common humanity. That new and just world will be created by the people who have suffered oppression - the people of colour - with the support of all decent men and women.

In that spirit, I appeal, on behalf of the Special Committee, for the unity of all people of the black diaspora in support of the oppressed people of South Africa and for the fraternal support of all nations and all men and women of goodwill.

As Dr. DuBois said, the "coloured folk have much to remember and they will not forget". They will never forget their friends in this hour of destiny. Dr. DuBois was, above all, an optimist, whose optimism was based on faith in the future. In his "Last Message to the World", he said:

"As you live, believe in life. Always human beings will live and progress to greater, broader and fuller life. The only possible death is to lose belief in this truth simply because the great end comes slowly, because the time is long".

We, in the Special Committee, share that faith and that optimism - for South Africa, for Africa, for the world.

I would like to conclude with a quotation from an article by Dr. DuBois on the "African Roots of War" in 1915:

"Twenty centuries before the Christ a great cloud swept over sea and settled on Africa, darkening and well-nigh blotting out the culture of the land of Egypt. For half a thousand years it rested there until a black woman, Queen Nefertiti, 'the most venerated figure in Egyptian history', rose to the throne of the pharaohs and redeemed the world and her people. Twenty centuries after Christ, black Africa, prostrated, raped, and shamed, lies at the feet of the

conquering Philistines of Europe. Beyond the awful sea a black woman is weeping and waiting, with her sons on her breast. What shall the end be? The world - old and fearful things, War and Wealth, Murder and Luxury? Or shall it be a new thing - a new peace and new democracy of all races: a great humanity of equal men?"