

The Long Walk

Nelson Mandela

In 1998, the fiftieth anniversary year of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the then President of the Republic of South Africa and Chairperson of the Non-Aligned Movement voiced his personal assessment of the enduring significance of that landmark statement. It was his final address to the UN General Assembly, from which we reprint some excerpts.

... The Non-Aligned Movement, as well as my own country, which is a proud member of that Movement, invests great trust in this Organization to discharge its responsibilities to all nations, especially at this critical period of its existence.

Quite appropriately, this fifty-third session of the General Assembly will be remembered through the ages as the moment at which we marked and celebrated the fiftieth anniversary of the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Born in the aftermath of the defeat of the Nazi and fascist crime against humanity, this Declaration held high the hope that all our societies would, in future, be built on the foundations of the glorious vision spelt out in each of its clauses.

For those who had to fight for their emancipation, those such as ourselves, who, with United Nations help, had to free ourselves from the criminal apartheid system, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights served as the vindication of the justice of our cause. At the same time, it constituted a challenge to us that our freedom, once achieved, should be dedicated to the implementation of the perspectives contained in the Declaration. Today we celebrate the fact that this historic document has survived a turbulent five decades, which have seen some of the most extraordinary developments in the evolution of human society. These include the collapse of the colonial system, the passing of a bipolar world, breathtaking advances in science and technology, and the achievement of the complex process of globalization.

And yet, at the end of it all, the human

beings who are the subject of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights continue to be afflicted by wars and violent conflicts.

They have, as yet, not attained their freedom from fear of death that would be brought about by the use of weapons of mass destruction as well as conventional arms.

Many are still unable to exercise the fundamental and inalienable democratic rights that would enable them to participate in the determination of the destiny of their countries, nations, families and children and to protect themselves from tyranny and dictatorship. The very right to be human is denied every day to hundreds of millions of people as a result of poverty and the unavailability of basic necessities, such as food, jobs, water and shelter, education, health care and a healthy environment.

The failure to achieve the vision contained in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights finds dramatic expression in the contrast between wealth and poverty which characterizes the divide between the countries of the North and the countries of the South and within individual countries in all hemispheres. It is made especially poignant and challenging by the fact that this coexistence of wealth and poverty, the perpetuation of the practice of the resolution of inter-State and intra-State conflicts by war and the denial of the democratic right of many across the world, all result from acts of commission and omission, particularly by those who occupy positions of leadership in politics, in the economy, and in other spheres of human activity.

What I am trying to say is that all these social ills, which constitute an offence against the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, are not a preordained result of the forces of nature or the product of a curse of the deities. They are the consequence of decisions which men and women take or refuse to take, men and women all of whom will not hesitate to pledge their devoted support for the vision conveyed in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

This Declaration was proclaimed as universal precisely because the founders of this Organization and the nations of the world that joined hands to fight the scourge of fascism, including many that still had to achieve their own emancipation, understood clearly that our human world was an interdependent whole. Necessarily, the values of happiness, justice, human dignity, peace and prosperity have a universal application, because each people and every individual is entitled to them. Similarly, no people can truly say it is blessed with happiness, peace and prosperity where others, as human as themselves, continue to be afflicted with misery, conflict, terrorism and deprivation.

Thus can we say that the challenge posed by the next 50 years of the

Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and by the next century whose character it must help to fashion, consists in whether humanity, and especially those who will occupy positions of leadership, will have the courage to ensure that at last we build a human world consistent with the provisions of that historic Declaration and other human rights instruments that have been adopted since 1948.

Immediately, a whole range of areas of conflict confronts us, in Africa, Europe and Asia. All of us are familiar with these, which range from the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Angola and Sudan on my own continent, to the Balkans in Europe and Afghanistan, Tajikistan and Sri Lanka in Asia.

Clearly, this Organization, and especially the Security Council, acting together with people of goodwill in the countries and areas concerned, has a responsibility to act decisively to contribute to the termination of these destructive conflicts. Continuously, we have to fight to defeat the primitive tendency towards the glorification of arms, the adulation of force, born of the illusion that justice can be guaranteed by the capacity to kill, or that disputes are necessarily best resolved by resort to violent means. As Africans, we are grateful to the Secretary-General for the contribution he has made to help us find the way towards ending violent strife on our continent ...

Towards a nuclear-weapon-free world

The very first resolution of the General Assembly, adopted in January 1946, sought to address the challenge of

‘the elimination from national armaments of atomic weapons and of all other major weapons adaptable to mass destruction.’ (*resolution 1 (I), para. 5 (c)*)

We must face the fact that after countless initiatives and resolutions, we still do not have concrete and generally accepted proposals supported by a clear commitment by the nuclear-weapon States to the speedy, final and total elimination of nuclear weapons and nuclear-weapon capabilities.

We take this opportunity to salute our sister Republic of Brazil for its decision to accede to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons and to urge all others that have not yet done so to follow this excellent example.

In an honest attempt to contribute to the definition of the systematic and progressive steps required to eliminate these weapons and the threat of annihilation which they pose, South Africa, together with Brazil, Egypt, Ireland, Mexico, New Zealand, Slovenia and Sweden, will be submitting a draft resolution to the First Committee for consideration by the Assembly.

It is appropriately titled ‘Towards a nuclear-weapon-free world: the need for a new agenda’.

I call with all humility on all Members of the United Nations seriously to consider this important draft resolution and to give it their support. We must ask the question, which might sound naive to those who have elaborated sophisticated arguments to justify their refusal to eliminate these terrible and terrifying weapons of mass destruction – why do they need them, anyway? In reality, no rational answer can be advanced to explain in a satisfactory manner what, in the end, is the consequence of Cold War inertia and an attachment to the use of the threat of brute force to assert the primacy of some States over others.

Urgent steps are also required to arrive at a just and permanent peace in the Middle East on the basis of the realization of the legitimate aspirations of the people of Palestine and respect for the independence and security of all the States of this important region. We also look forward to the resolution of the outstanding issues of Western Sahara and East Timor, convinced that it is possible to take these matters off the world agenda on the basis of settlements that meet the interests of all the peoples concerned.

Similarly, we would like to salute the bold steps taken by the Government of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, this supremely important country of Africa, to enable it to return to democratic rule and a system of governance directed at serving the interests of all its people.

Together we are also faced with the scourges of drug abuse and the illicit traffic in narcotics, organized transnational crime and international terrorism. We strongly support the measures adopted or being discussed by the United Nations to deal with these challenges and commit our country and Government to co-operate fully in all regional and international initiatives to ensure that the peoples of the world, including our own, are spared the destructive impact of these crimes.

The world is gripped by an economic crisis, which, as President Clinton said in this city only a week ago, has plunged millions into sudden poverty and disrupted and disoriented the lives of ordinary people, and brought deep personal disappointment to tens of millions of people around the world.

President Clinton also said:

‘Recent press reports have described an entire generation working its way into the middle class for over 25 years, then being plummeted into poverty within a matter of months. The stories are heartbreaking – doctors and nurses forced to live in the lobby of a closed hospital; middle-class families who owned their own homes, sent their children to college, travelled abroad, now living by selling their possessions.’

President Clinton said that

‘fast-moving currents’ in the world economy ‘have brought or aggravated problems in Russia and Asia. They threaten emerging economies from Latin America to South Africa’,

and he spoke of sacrificing lives in the name of economic theory.

He further recognized that with a quarter of the world’s population in declining growth, the United States, in Federal Reserve Board Chairman Alan Greenspan’s words,

‘... cannot forever be an oasis of prosperity. Growth at home depends upon growth abroad’.

I have quoted the President of the United States at such length both because he is correct and because he is the leader of the most powerful country in the world. Accordingly, we would like to believe that with the problem facing all humanity, and especially the poor, having thus been recognized, courage will not desert the powerful when it comes to determining the correct course to be taken, and following this course, addressing the challenge that has been identified.

The tragedy President Clinton describes goes far beyond the sudden impoverishment of the middle class to which he correctly refers. Poverty has been and is the condition of the daily existence of even larger numbers of ordinary working people. Paradoxically, the challenge of poverty around the globe has been brought into sharp focus by the destructive fast movements of currents of wealth from one part of the world to another.

Put starkly, we have a situation in which the further accumulation of wealth, rather than contributing to the improvement of the quality of life of all humanity, is generating poverty at a frighteningly accelerated pace. The imperative to act on this urgent, life-and-death matter can no longer be ignored. The central challenge to ensure that the countries of the South gain access to the productive resources that have accumulated within the world economy should not be avoided by seeking to apportion as much blame as possible to the poor.

Clearly, all relevant matters will have to be addressed, including such issues as greater inflows of long-term capital; terms of trade; debt cancellation; technology transfers; human resource development; the emancipation of women and the development of the young; the elimination of poverty; the HIV/AIDS epidemic; environmental protection; and the strengthening of financial and other institutions relevant to sustained economic growth and development.

Fortunately, it is no longer in dispute that serious work will also have to be done to restructure the multilateral financial and economic institutions so that they address the problems of the modern world economy and become responsive to the urgent needs of the poor of the world.

Similarly, this very Organization, including its important Security Council, must itself go through its own process of reformation so that it serves the interests of the peoples of the world, in keeping with the purposes for which it was established.

The issues we have mentioned were discussed in a comprehensive manner at the Twelfth Summit Conference of the Non-Aligned Movement held in the city of Durban, South Africa, earlier this month.

I am privileged to commend the decisions of that important meeting to the General Assembly and the United Nations as a whole, including the Durban Declaration, which the Summit adopted unanimously. I am certain that the decisions adopted by the Non-Aligned Movement will greatly assist this Organization in its work and further enhance the contribution of the countries of the South to the solution of the problems that face the nations of the world, both rich and poor.

This is probably the last time I will have the honour to stand at this rostrum to address the General Assembly. Born as the First World War came to a close, and departing from public life as the world marks half a century of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, I have reached that part of the long walk when the opportunity is granted, as it should be to all men and women, to retire to some rest and tranquillity in the village of my birth.

As I sit in Qunu, my village, and grow as ancient as its hills, I will continue to entertain the hope that there has emerged a cadre of leaders in my own country and region, on my continent and in the world, which will not allow that any should be denied their freedom, as we were; that any should be turned into refugees, as we were; that any should be condemned to go hungry, as we were; that any should be stripped of their human dignity, as we were.

I will continue to hope that Africa's renaissance will strike deep roots and blossom forever, without regard to the changing seasons. Were all these hopes to translate into a realizable dream and not a nightmare to torment the soul of the aged, then will I, indeed, have peace and tranquillity. Then would history and the billions throughout the world proclaim that it was right that we dreamt and that we toiled to give life to a workable dream.

(UN General Assembly 53rd Session, 21st September 1998)

1(I). Establishment of a Commission to Deal with the Problems Raised by the Discovery of Atomic Energy

Resolved by the General Assembly of the United Nations to establish a Commission, with the composition and competence set out hereunder, to deal with the problems raised by the discovery of atomic energy and other related matters:

1. Establishment of the Commission

A Commission is hereby established by the General Assembly with the terms of reference set out under section 5 below.

2. Relations of the Commission with the Organs of the United Nations

a) The Commission shall submit its reports and recommendations to the Security Council, and such reports and recommendations shall be made public unless the Security Council, in the interest of peace and security, otherwise directs. In the appropriate cases the Security Council should transmit these reports to the General Assembly and the Members of the United Nations, as well as to the Economic and Social Council and other organs within the framework of the United Nations.

b) In view of the Security Council's primary responsibility under the Charter of the United Nations for the maintenance of international peace and security, the Security Council shall issue directions to the Commission in matters affecting security. On these matters the Commission shall be accountable for its work to the Security Council ...

5. Terms of Reference of the Commission

The Commission shall proceed with the utmost despatch and enquire into all phases of the problem, and make such recommendations from time to time with respect to them as it finds possible. In particular, the Commission shall make specific proposals:

(a) for extending between all nations the exchange of basic scientific information for peaceful ends;

(b) for control of atomic energy to the extent necessary to ensure its use only for peaceful purposes;

(c) for the elimination from national armaments of atomic weapons and of all other major weapons adaptable to mass destruction;

(d) for effective safeguards by way of inspection and other means to protect complying States against the hazards of violations and evasions.

The work of the Commission should proceed by separate stages, the successful completion of each of which will develop the necessary confidence of the world before the next stage is undertaken ...

Seventeenth plenary meeting, 24 January 1946