

MARTIN LUTHER KING DAY
Speech at Church Center for the United Nations, New York,
January 18, 2001

Dr. King lived less than 40 years. His public life, from the boycott in Montgomery, was only 12 years. But he has had a more lasting and positive impact on our lives than many Presidents and Generals.

In celebrating Dr. King, who has inspired us, we also celebrate, in a way, other great African-Americans who have made notable contributions to human progress.

Dr. King has a special place because he led a great non-violent movement for freedom in which thousands of African-Americans, as well as whites, braved prison and beatings and even death - by conquering fear and hatred and by their willingness to make any sacrifice.

In the course of that difficult struggle, he developed a broader vision which encompassed the liberation of humanity from poverty and deprivation, and from wars - for the "beloved community."

The movement initiated by Dr. King and African-Americans thus gave a moral lead to the whole country and inspired the world. It gave birth to the mass movements against the Vietnam war and for women's rights.

Dr. King was revolutionary - a "creative extremist" in his words - who recognised that true compassion is more than giving a coin to a beggar; it is to see that the system which produces beggars is restructured.

Dr. King was conscious that his ideals were those of the United Nations. I recall that he visited the United Nations more than once to see Dr. Ralph Bunche and U Thant, the Secretary-General who shared his vision. We, in the United Nations, were inspired by him.

In January 1979, on his 50th birthday, an impressive international tribute to Dr. King was held in Atlanta under the auspices of the United Nations Special Committee against Apartheid - attended by representatives of many governments and organisations. The Prime Minister came from Sweden and Foreign Minister from Norway.

The United Nations General Assembly awarded a gold medal to Dr. King in November 1982.

These tributes focussed on action against apartheid because of the

contribution of Dr. King to the movement against apartheid.

The civil rights movement in the United States took place at the same time as the Defiance Campaign in South Africa led by Chief Albert Luthuli - and these movements destroyed the racist myth that people with a black skin were not capable of the discipline required by non-violent defiance.

He had sponsored an international Declaration of Conscience against Apartheid in 1957.

In December 1962, he issued a joint appeal with Chief Luthuli for a boycott of South Africa, for an international quarantine of apartheid.

In 1963, when the United Nations set up a Special Committee against Apartheid, one of the first letters we received was from Dr. King,

I listened to a speech by Dr. King on South Africa at Hunter College in December 1965. He said that non-violence had so far been used within national borders - in India, the United States and parts of Africa. The time had come to employ non-violence on an international scale through a massive international boycott of apartheid. "The time has come," he said, "for an international alliance of peoples of all nations against racism."

That took years of effort, but in due course millions people around the world were mobilised.

The non-violent struggle in South Africa - the defiance by the mass democratic movement - was reinforced by the non-violent struggle abroad in solidarity with South Africans - the "Free South Africa" movement in the United States and similar movements in other countries.

More than ten thousand people went to prison in the United States, Britain, New Zealand, Australia and other countries.

When racist rule was ended in South Africa in 1994, there was an amazing reconciliation rather than hatred and revenge. That was hailed as a "miracle."

I remember that from the 1950s, there was great concern in the United Nations about the danger of a race conflict spreading around the world. If that conflict was averted, it was due to the humanism and farsightedness of leaders like Dr. King, Chief Luthuli and Nelson Mandela and the movements they led.

In the south of the United States and the south of Africa, racism was overcome though not entirely eradicated. That was only a first step.

The United Nations has continued efforts to mobilise world opinion to

eradicate racism, in its old and new manifestations, all over the world, benefiting from the experience of the struggles against Jim Crow and apartheid.

It is, therefore, most appropriate that the United Nations is holding the World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance in South Africa in September.

South Africa has been a victim of one of the worst manifestations of racism. It is also a country which has been described as a microcosm of the world (somewhat like the United States). Its population consists not only of indigenous Africans, but of those who trace their ancestry to many countries of Europe and Asia. It is, as Bishop Desmond Tutu described it, a “rainbow nation.”

They are struggling to build a nation where diversity will not be seen as a threat but as a gift, an opportunity for mutual enrichment in one human family.

I am confident that the conference will be inspired by the vision of Dr. King, Chief Luthuli and Nelson Mandela – and of Mahatma Gandhi who initiated non-violent resistance in South Africa almost a century ago.