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Remarks of the Honorable James Roosevelt (Dem. California)  
Before the 48th General Conference of the  
International Labor Organization Geneva Switzerland  
Jul. 8, 1964 on the ILO Declaration on Apartheid

Mr. President:

It is pleasing to note that this year we meet in an atmosphere greatly different from that of last year when the question of apartheid - which we discuss in the Report before us - had all but torn the International Labor Organization asunder. But in the aftermath of that ordeal, we see from our constructive approach - and results of the work of the Apartheid Committee - that this Organization has, in the opinion of the United States Delegation, grown stronger and more resolute in purpose.

The Draft Declaration before us testifies most forcefully that the aims and purposes of this Organization so eloquently set forth in the Declaration of Philadelphia sixteen years ago are more than hollow echoes and pious platitudes. This Declaration on Apartheid sets forth in moving and meaningful terms the path and course of action which all countries must take to end the odious and unjustifiable policy of apartheid practiced in South Africa.

Let me state in unequivocal terms that the United States Government considers the policy of apartheid repugnant and we have no hesitancy in stating that the sooner the world is rid of this disease the better for the family of nations. On this question, there is no difference between my Government and the others which condemn this disgusting policy; that which sometimes separates us is not goals - but means towards that goal.

The United States Delegation gives this Declaration its full support and has no hesitancy in commending it enthusiastically.

This document, in my opinion, will rank with those documents which in our own time have extolled as no others the fundamental human rights and dignities which are inalienable to man. The Declaration before us is the logical consequence of the Declaration of Philadelphia and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights - both adopted in the same year.

It is, of course, a tragic and a sad commentary on Western Civilization that such a document as this one is at all necessary. To reasonable men, the adoption of the United Nations Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination last November would have been sufficient. But we have learned painfully that we deal not with reasonable men, or with men of good will - two qualities which are non-existent with Mr. Verwoerd's band of willful men in South Africa - but rather we deal with outcasts of civilization; we deal with men who have dared to transgress the laws of God and defy the conscience of mankind. We deal with men of iniquity.

If we look at the record, we will find a dismal picture. We will find that for 16 years, the Government of South Africa has followed a calculated policy of progressive application of inhuman treatment of more than 11 million persons solely because of the color of their skins. To civilized

men, this is incomprehensible. A policy designed to create hatred, bitterness and division among men can only lead to ruin. The outcome of such a conflict must affect the world at large.

There was considerable discussion of this very point in the Committee, and there is no question but that men everywhere are concerned with the effects of the policy of apartheid. One does not doubt that the policy could have disastrous results and that it could reach catastrophic proportions. For South Africa, after all, is a part of the world and must be held responsive to world opinion.

My Government, however, has repeatedly stopped short of stating that the policy of apartheid in South Africa is a definite threat to international peace and security. We have maintained that, although racial discrimination and segregation is a concern everywhere--indeed, the denial of human rights anywhere is a concern everywhere--apartheid is still essentially a domestic matter. This is a fact whether we like it or not. If we did not keep that fact before us, we are apt to act not as responsible members of the international family of nations, but as impulsive children of that family.

As much as our emotions tell us to the contrary, our senses must constantly remind us that international law has not yet reached that mature stage when we can say with confidence and definite certitude that the denial of basic human rights in one country is without question a threat to international peace and security, and is, therefore a contravention of the law of nations. Perhaps that day will soon come; but it has not yet arrived.

Freedom and equality for the deprived in South Africa is a matter of fundamental human rights. The enjoyment of social justice may be postponed, but it cannot be forever denied. And to postpone it is to make more painful the inevitable confrontation. I would be less than candid with you if I did not say that the United States does not go unscathed in this burning question of equal rights and social justice. For too long, too many citizens in the United States have been denied too much by too few. The vast majority of these deprived citizens have been denied their just due solely because of their color.

We, in the United States, have our domestic South Africas - Mississippi, Birmingham, Cambridge, Little Rock. There is, however, one distinct and basic difference: men of good will - both black and white in the United States are determined to eradicate from our society this pernicious disease called racism. Last Thursday in Washington I voted in the Congress of the United States for final passage of the Comprehensive Civil Rights Bill of 1964. The President signed it into law the same evening.

We see in the wake of our present crisis a society where men will no longer be denied their freedoms and dignities because of the color of their skin, or the God which they worship, or because of their ethnic origin. We shall not achieve it without some struggle--but we shall achieve it.

South Africa, the world's Mississippi, is the only country in the world other than Nazi Germany, which has elevated racism to the status of a state doctrine. And I believe from the depths of my soul, that like the policy of Nazi Germany this policy too shall fail.

This Declaration drafted and accepted by men of good-will, will be an important hallmark toward the end which we all are seeking. Its unanimous acceptance will testify most eloquently that the community of nations stands firmly together and will not be divided on so great a moral issue.

During the committee deliberation, some pointed out the moral value of this Declaration. But I wish to point out that Declarations have more than moral weight. In fact, some of the new countries have based parts of their constitutions on articles from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights; other countries have agreed to abide by the Declaration even in international arbitrations.

But lest the fact be forgotten, that Declaration was not adopted unanimously. Some of those nations which are now most vociferous in opposing apartheid and all forms of social injustice and inequality are the ones which abstained on the Universal Declaration. It is not that they have changed their policies; on the contrary, it is now easier to be on the side of the Angels. These countries echo the words of Victor Hugo when he stated "I must follow the masses, for I am their leader".

We here would all agree that General Assembly Resolution 1514 calling for the Granting of Independence to Colonial Peoples and Territories has had a profound effect on colonial powers; and rightly so. We are now approaching the end of that era. This Resolution, too, did not have unanimous acceptance.

But as the Committee's distinguished chairman, Mr. Diarra of Mali, stated during the course of the deliberation, unanimity for the sake of unanimity was not the desired goal. But what was desired was unanimity for the sake of strength. This, we have attained.

Many of you criticized my Government in the Committee; perhaps rightly, perhaps wrongly. Only time will give us that answer. But I wish to say that this Declaration--when we give our assent to it--as we shall--places upon us a moral obligation and a solemn responsibility which we will not take lightly. And because of this, we thought it only fair and just to express our reservations. To do otherwise would have been deceitful and would deserve your disrespect and condemnation. To this end, the United States Delegation expresses gratitude to the African States for their very constructive role in assisting the Committee to find an honorable solution to many problems which confronted us.

Some of the language may be interpreted in many ways and some state that it goes beyond the Security Council resolution of 18 June 1964. But the sincerity and good faith which the African countries demonstrated in putting forth their amendments impressed us greatly. And though the language may be interpreted many ways, the United States accepted the amendment in the spirit it was offered. The Declaration is stronger and more meaningful because of this constructive approach.

It is to be hoped, Mr. President, that the Declaration before this Conference will do much to re-establish the dialogue between South Africa and the community of civilized nations and compel South Africa to abandon once and for all its state policy of Apartheid.

Men everywhere are affected by the sufferings of the oppressed wherever they may be. Such closeness deeply affects the destiny of nations, their peoples, and the history of international relations. There is no quarter of this globe which has not felt the movement for human freedom and equality. The two great tides which sweep the world today--human freedom and social justice--must and will blow across South Africa liberating all that is in their wake. The desire to be free is eternal.

Freedom for the oppressed population in South Africa and around the globe must be the goal of nations represented here. If we think in terms of only South Africa, we run the risk of defeating our own purpose. But South Africa must remain our first objective for it is there that we find the greatest example of "man's inhumanity to man". My delegation is proud to join in full support of this historic Declaration.