

1984

Appeal for Action Against Apartheid

Martin Luther King Jr.

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The Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.



“APPEAL FOR ACTION AGAINST APARTHEID”

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. appeals for sanctions against South Africa jointly with Chief Albert J. Lutuli on Human Rights Day, 10 December 1962

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

“Hold meetings and demonstrations on December 10, 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 buy South Africa’s products;

“Don’t trade or invest in South Africa;

“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 a historic address at a meeting at Hunter College, New York, on human rights day (December 10) 1965, the late Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. called for an international boycott of South Africa. The 1965 meeting was organized by the AMERICAN COMMITTEE ON AFRICA — the initiator of the April 4, 1984 National Armband Day Against Apartheid and U.S. Racism.

CALL FOR AN INTERNATIONAL BOYCOTT OF APARTHEID SOUTH AFRICA

*Statement by the late Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.
at a meeting at Hunter College, New York City, on Human Rights Day
10 December 1965*

Africa has been depicted for more than a century as the home of black cannibals and ignorant primitives. Despite volumes of facts contraverting this picture, the stereotype persists in books, motion pictures, and other media of communication.

Africa does have spectacular savages and brutes today, but they are not black. They are the sophisticated white rulers of South Africa who profess to be cultured, religious and civilized, but whose conduct and philosophy stamp them unmistakably as modern-day barbarians.

We are in an era in which the issue of human rights is the central question confronting all nations. In this complex struggle an obvious but little appreciated fact has gained attention — the large majority of the human race is non-white — yet it is that large majority which lives in hideous poverty. While millions enjoy an unexampled opulence in developed nations, ten thousand people die of hunger each and every day of the year in the undeveloped world. To assert white supremacy, to invoke white economic and military power, to maintain the *status quo* is to foster the danger of international race war . . . What does the South African Government contribute to this tense situation? These are the incendiary words of the South African philosophy spoken by its Prime Minister, Dr. Verwoerd:

“We want to keep South Africa white. Keeping it white can only mean one thing, namely, white domination, not ‘leadership’, not ‘guidance’, but control, supremacy.”

The South African Government to make the white supreme has had to reach into the past and revive the nightmarish ideology and practices of nazism. We are witnessing a recrudescence of the barbarism which murdered more humans than any war in history. In South Africa today, all opposition to white supremacy is condemned as communism, and in its name, due process is destroyed; a medieval segregation is organized with twentieth century efficiency and drive; a sophisticated form of slavery is imposed by a minority upon a majority which is kept in grinding poverty; the dignity of human personality is defiled; and world opinion is arrogantly defied.

Once more, we read of tortures in jails with electric devices, suicides among prisoners, forced confessions, while in the outside community ruthless persecution of editors, religious leaders, and political opponents suppress free speech and a free press.

South Africa says to the world: “We have become a powerful industrial economy; we are too strong to be defeated by paper resolutions of world tribunals; we are immune to protest and to economic reprisals. We are invulnerable to opposition from within or without; if our evil offends you, you will have to learn to live with it.”

Increasingly, in recent months this conclusion has been echoed by sober commentators of other countries who disapprove, but, nevertheless, assert that there can be no remedy against this formidable adversary of human rights.

Do we, too, acknowledge defeat? Have we tried everything and failed? In examining this question as Americans, we are immediately struck by the fact that the United States moved with strikingly different energy when it reached a dubious conclusion that our interests were threatened in the Dominican Republic. We inundated that small nation with overwhelming force, shocking the world with our zealotry and naked power. With respect to South Africa, however, our protest is so muted and peripheral it merely mildly disturbs the sensibilities of the segregationists, while our trade and investments substantially stimulate their economy to greater heights. We pat them on the wrist in permitting racially mixed receptions in our Embassy and by exhibiting films depicting Negro artists. But we give them massive support through American investments in motor and rubber industries, by extending some forty million dollars in loans through our most distinguished banking and financial institutions, by purchasing gold and other minerals mined by black slave labour, by giving them a sugar quota, by maintaining three tracking stations there, and by providing them with the prestige of a nuclear reactor built with our technical co-operation and fueled with refined uranium supplied by us.

When it is realized that Great Britain, France and other democratic Powers also prop up the economy of South Africa — and when to all of this is added the fact that the USSR has indicated its willingness to participate in a boycott — it is proper to wonder how South Africa can so confidently defy the civilized world. The conclusion is inescapable that it is less sure of its own power, but more sure that the great nations will not sacrifice trade and profit to oppose them effectively. The shame of our nation is that it is objectively an ally of this monstrous Government in its grim war with its own black people.

Our default is all the more grievous because one of the blackest pages of our history was our participation in the infamous African slave trade of the 18th century. The rape of Africa was conducted substantially for our benefit to facilitate the growth of our nation and to enhance its commerce. There are few parallels in human history of the period in which Africans were seized and branded like animals, packed into ships' holds like cargo and transported into chattel slavery. Millions suffered agonizing death in the middle passage in a holocaust reminiscent of the Nazi slaughter of Jews and Poles, and others. We have an obligation of atonement that is not cancelled by the passage of time. Indeed, the slave trade in one sense was more understandable than our contemporary policy. There was less sense of humanity in the world three hundred years ago. The slave trade was widely approved by the major Powers of the world. The economies of England, Spain, and the U.S. rested heavily on the profits derived from it. Today, in our opulent society, our reliance on trade with South Africa is infinitesimal significance. No real national interest impels us to be cautious, gentle, or a good customer of a nation that offends the world's conscience.

Have we the power to be more than peevish with South Africa, but yet refrain from acts of war? To list the extensive economic relations of the great Powers with South Africa is to suggest a potent non-violent path. The international potential of non-violence has never been employed. Non-violence has been practised within national borders in India, the U.S. and in regions of Africa with spectacular success. The time has come to utilize non-violence fully through a massive international boycott which would involve the USSR, Great Britain,

France, the United States, Germany and Japan. Millions of people can personally give expression to their abhorrence of the world's worst racism through such a far-flung boycott. No nation professing a concern for man's dignity could avoid assuming its obligations if people of all States and races were to adopt a firm stand. Nor need we confine an international boycott to South Africa. The time has come for an international alliance of peoples of all nations against racism.

For the American Negro there is a special relationship with Africa. It is the land of his origin. It was despoiled by invaders; its culture was arrested and concealed to justify white supremacy. The American Negro's ancestors were not only driven into slavery, but their links with their past were severed so that their servitude might be psychological as well as physical. In this period when the American Negro is giving moral leadership and inspiration to his own nation, he must find the resources to aid his suffering brothers in his ancestral homeland. Nor is this aid a one-way street. The civil rights movement in the United States has derived immense inspiration from the successful struggles of those Africans who have attained freedom in their own nations. The fact that black men govern States, are building democratic institutions, sit in world tribunals, and participate in global decision-making gives every Negro a needed sense of dignity.

In this effort, the American Negro will not be alone. As this meeting testifies, there are many white people who know that liberty is indivisible. Even more inspiring is the fact that in South Africa itself incredibly brave white people are risking their careers, their homes and their lives in the cause of human justice. Nor is this a plea to Negroes to fight on two fronts. The struggle for freedom forms one long front crossing oceans and mountains. The brotherhood of man is not confined within a narrow, limited circle of select people. It is felt everywhere in the world; it is an international sentiment of surpassing strength. Because this is true, when men of good will finally unite, they will be invincible.

Through recent anthropological discoveries, science has substantially established that the cradle of humanity is Africa. The earliest creatures who passed the divide between animal and man seem to have first emerged in East and South Africa. Professor Raymond Dart described this historical epoch as the moment when man "trembled on the brink of humanity". A million years later in the same place some men of South Africa are again "trembling on the brink of humanity"; but instead of advancing from pre-human to human, they are reversing the process and are travelling backward in time from human to pre-human.

Civilization has come a long way; it still has far to go, and it cannot afford to be set back by resolute, wicked men. Negroes were dispersed over thousands of miles and over many continents, yet today they have found each other again. Negro and white have been separated for centuries by evil men and evil myths. But they have found each other. The powerful unity of Negro with Negro and white with Negro is stronger than the most potent and entrenched racism. The whole human race will benefit when it ends the abomination that has diminished the stature of man for too long. This is the task to which we are called by the suffering in South Africa, and our response should be swift and unstinting. Out of this struggle will come the glorious reality of the family of man.

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