

Agenda Item 112 & 113: Elimination of Racism and Racial Discrimination and Right of Peoples to Self-Determination

Statement by Hon'ble Mr. Swadesh Chakraborty, MP on October 20, 2000

Madam Chairman,

Racial discrimination is based on misconceptions, but there are almost as many misconceptions about racial discrimination. The most troubling of these is the belief that, because racism is no longer the ideology of any State, as it was in Nazism or apartheid, it is now at worst a marginal problem. This, unfortunately, is not so. Globalisation has made racism and racial discrimination an extremely live and taxing problem, and the international community must come to grips with it.

Until the first half of the twentieth century, racial discrimination was an adjunct of empire. The colonial powers justified their rule over much of the world on the grounds of racial and cultural superiority; this was the white man's burden. Imperialism and colonialism have died, but attitudes and habits of thought ingrained in entire populations over generations have not, and will take much longer to fade. If the countries concerned refuse to acknowledge that these attitudes now live, like a repressed libido, in their national psyches, they will find it impossible to counter them, until they manifest themselves in pathological, violent and uncontrollable forms.

With globalisation, the unfamiliar and the racially distinct have come into countries where, even two generations ago, populations were homogenous. Earlier racist attitudes were projected outwards, on a world considered inferior. Now, in these countries, populations have to come to terms with different races and cultures that have settled within their borders. Their record is uneven. Some have acknowledged and tried to come to terms with the challenge of becoming a multi-ethnic, multi-cultural State. Others have found it much harder to identify themselves in national terms, without in turn defining their nationalism in terms of race. As globalisation picks up pace, these challenges will only mount, they will not go away.

In many countries that host large immigrant populations, racism is a fact of daily life for those of a different race or culture from the natives. Unemployment, which has become a serious problem in many of the developed economies, exacerbates racism. Native populations, culturally indoctrinated, almost without realising it, to believe that they were racially superior, find those whom they had been led to believe were inferior to them working, when they are idle. Economic resentment and racial prejudice feed on each other. In a pattern first seen in Europe in the 1930s, politicians believe they can profit if they cater to these insecurities. The larger the population unemployed or disaffected, the greater the chances of political support for views that are racially discriminatory. Even if these are espoused by a radical fringe, mainstream parties, in order not to be outflanked, protect themselves by adopting policies that are camouflaged, but in essence racist.

A good example are the immigration policies of the majority of developed countries. Though rationalised in a variety of ways, the truth is that these are designed to keep out, or

regulate the entry of, peoples of a different racial or cultural background. The kind of work visas issued compounds the problem; the bulk is for the menial jobs that native populations are no longer prepared to do. Seeing immigrants doing these jobs simply confirms the attitude, even if latent, that these races are inferior. At the same time, simply because they are where they are and because they are employed, the migrant workers inflame the resentment of the unemployed lumpen in the developed countries.

These are systemic, structural flaws in societies that can only be corrected by sustained governmental attention, social awareness and an acceptance that a problem exists that has to be tackled. If we look at only the extreme manifestations of prejudice, the endemic problem of racial discrimination will never go away. For instance, much attention is being paid to hate on the Internet. This is certainly a problem, and deserves the attention it is getting. However, what is almost ignored is the open racial prejudice, which is so instinctive that it is not even acknowledged as such, of the mainstream international media.

Look at any reputable newspaper in the developed world. Follow the reports put out by the international news agencies. Monitor the coverage of international affairs on the television. Without exception, the third world makes the news only when things go seriously wrong, and the line taken by the media is that catastrophes occur because the populations there are congenitally incompetent, corrupt or violent; the third world has problems because their populations are inferior. The damage that this causes, because of the global influence of the Western media, is incalculable; it certainly feeds into and reinforces the prejudices of unabashed racists in the developed world, but has a far greater and more insidious effect in the evolution of attitudes of the general population, and in the formulation of governmental policies.

Consider, for instance, the problem of refugees. From Central Europe in the 1930s to the Great Lakes in the 1990s, vast refugee movements have often been set off by racism, but the way they have been treated varies very sharply. In the 1990s, the developed world has tried to create a new normative framework under which refugee problems must be contained regionally; despite the international conventions, the global right of sanctuary would disappear. Sadly, this too is driven by a fear of being swamped by other races; the white man does not want the burden of black and brown refugees. Or consider the very differing responses to the Consolidated Appeals put out for countries in need of humanitarian assistance; the few in South-eastern Europe are oversubscribed, those in other parts of the world, and particularly in Africa, get a fraction of what the UN system asks for on their behalf.

These are a few of the reasons why it is so important to have these issues looked at squarely and in depth in the World Conference.

Madam Chairman,

If the problem of racism has been downplayed by some, for political reasons, the right of peoples to self-determination has been distorted by others, to serve political ends. Resolution 1514 (XV) of 1960, the 'Declaration on granting of independence to colonial peoples and territories', emphasised that all peoples have the right to self-determination, and the subjection of people to alien subjugation or domination constituted a denial of fundamental rights in Trust and Non-self-Governing Territories. Operative paragraph 6

categorically stated that any attempt aimed at the partial or total disruption of the national unity and territorial integrity of a country was incompatible with the purposes and principles of the Charter of the United Nations, and paragraph 7 enjoined all States to implement the Declaration on the basis of non-interference in the internal affairs of all States and to respect their territorial integrity.

The International Court of Justice, in 1986, ruled that the essence of self-determination lay in its primary aim of securing respect for the territorial boundaries of countries. Squarely, therefore, the ambit of self-determination is within the matrix of colonization, and it is bound by the concepts of territorial integrity, sovereignty and non-interference.

The Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action endorsed the "Declaration on the Principles of International Law concerning Cooperation among States" and re-emphasized that the right of self-determination is not to be construed as either authorizing or encouraging any action both internally generated or externally sponsored which could dismember or impair, totally or in part, the territorial integrity or political unity of sovereign and independent states. The Vienna Declaration underscored that democracy, development and respect for human rights are interdependent and mutually reinforcing.

In states that have now become independent, self-determination is best maintained through the regular exercise of democratic choice. Human dignity, freedom, justice tolerance and plurality are based on the full and equal participation in governance of each citizen in an open democracy.