

The World Conference Against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance (WCAR)

Africa Action Support for WCAR and a Call to fight AIDS and Global Apartheid

August 2001

Africa Action strongly supports the World Conference Against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance (WCAR) and applauds the work of all who have participated constructively in the preparatory processes from among UN agencies, Governments, NGOs and activists worldwide. We note with particular appreciation the work of the U.S. NGO Coordinating Committee, the International Human Rights Law Group, National Coalition of Blacks for Reparations in America (N'COBRA), the Lawyers Committee for Civil Rights Under Law, and the African and African Descendants Caucus (AADC).

Africa Action charges that the global AIDS pandemic must be seen as a matter of international racism. The AIDS crisis - whose epicenter is in Africa - is the harvest of an international system of global apartheid, where the consequences of racism, slavery and colonialism have, five centuries on, impoverished the African continent and left it on its own to combat the worst plague in human history. The World Conference should recognize that the resolution of the global AIDS pandemic is directly dependent upon the international fight against racism. It is the devaluation of black life that has enabled the western world to turn its eyes away from this global health crisis. Of all of the struggles against racism that we will discuss in Durban, none has farther reaching consequences for the immediate future of our common humanity.

Africa Action is addressing the WCAR on four principal areas:

1. a declaration that the slave trade and enslavement of Africans were crimes against humanity;
2. the right to reparations for slavery, colonialism, apartheid and continuing racism;
3. the cancellation of African countries' external debts;
4. financing for the Global Fund for AIDS and other infectious diseases.

The first two points relate to the need to acknowledge history and to accept that reparations must be paid. The latter two points address immediate steps that can and must be taken at the level of international public policy to save millions of African lives and to reverse the severe impoverishment of African people that has resulted from historical and contemporary international racism.

Together these points represent key elements of our vision of how to invigorate the future: by acknowledging past injustice, establishing appropriate remedies, and taking new concrete actions to address the most



pressing structural obstacles to Africans' and African descendants' access to their basic human rights today, especially -- at this critical juncture - the right to health (the right to life itself).

1. Crimes against humanity

The enslavement of Africans and the slave trade that sustained the institutions of slavery were crimes against humanity. The enslavement of Africans was - as the AADC has pointed out - "a unique tragedy in the history of humanity which is unparalleled not only because of its abhorrent barbarism but also in terms of its enormous magnitude, its institutionalized nature, its transnational dimension, and especially its negation of the very essence of the human nature of Africans and African descendants."

These crimes against humanity have shaped the life chances of hundreds of millions of Africans and African descendants, and established the foundations of inequality along the "color line" that are today manifest in a system of global apartheid characterized by obscene disparities in wealth, power and access to basic human rights, disparities that closely track race and place. Formal acknowledgment of these crimes against humanity is a necessary and salutary step in the process of repairing the damages caused by these crimes.

2. Reparations for the slave trade, slavery, colonialism and apartheid

Africa Action believes that actual reparations are more important than apologies. We believe that reparations will be among the most prominent issues at the World Conference. We welcome this and do not believe that this will detract from coverage of other current problems of intolerance throughout the world that also require attention, including contemporary forms of slavery. Indeed the challenge and opportunity at this World Conference is to connect history to the present. This requires an acknowledgment of the obligation of rich countries to support efforts to address the consequences of five centuries of creating an international economic system that benefits the few, mainly themselves. It also requires the recognition that racism is still central to the functioning of this global system.

It is the systemic and long-term impoverishment of the victims of racism, xenophobia and intolerance that should be the focus of this World Conference. Africa Action supports the call for reparations and associates itself with the Abuja Proclamation of 1993 sponsored by the Organization of African Unity and its Reparations Commission; the Declarations of Africans and African descendants at the WCAR regional meetings in Dakar, Senegal and Vienna, Austria; the Principles/Commitments on Race and Poverty drafted by the NGO Roundtable at the WCAR's Regional Preparatory meeting for the Americas; and the recent position paper of Human Rights Watch on Reparations (which represents a welcome shift in their work towards full inclusion of social and economic rights).

Africa Action believes that Africans and African descendants that are disadvantaged today as groups should be compensated by the governments responsible for the practices that inflicted such suffering upon them and that have today resulted in structural inequalities and abuses associated with the impoverishment of



Africans and African descendants. Compensation should provide resources adequate to address these structural inequalities. Those who commit crimes against humanity must make reparation and governments cannot avoid responsibility because of the passage of time. The poverty and inequities that characterize the struggles of Africans and African descendant people today are consequences of deliberate acts that have shaped the world.

3. Who Owes Whom? - Cancel Africa's External Debt

While the movement for reparations grows and gains more attention, respect and response from culpable governments and other institutions that benefitted from slavery, colonialism and apartheid; and while the machinery to manage reparations is being established, there is an urgent need for immediate international action on two life or death issues directly related to the legacy of international racism. The first is the illegitimate, immoral and crippling foreign debt that African countries owe to the wealthy white countries and the international institutions that represent their economic interests (i.e. the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund).

The 48 countries of sub-Saharan Africa spend approximately \$13.5 billion every year repaying debts to rich foreign creditors for past loans of questionable legitimacy. These debt repayments divert money directly from basic human needs such as health care and education, and undermine African governments' fight against the AIDS pandemic and their efforts to promote sustainable development. The All-Africa Conference of Churches has called Africa's massive foreign debt burden "a new form of slavery, as vicious as the slave trade".

Africa Action calls for the cancellation of Africa's foreign debt, which we consider in large part to be illegitimate, based on its origins and consequences. We consider the present and past attempts to deal with the debt crisis to be absolutely insufficient, and we oppose the existing debt relief framework, developed and controlled by creditors and designed to function only in their interests. Africa Action opposes conditionalities imposed by Northern creditors which perpetuate a global economic system where Africa remains economically controlled and exploited by the developed world. We believe that the costs of debt cancellation should be borne by the creditor nations and the International Financial Institutions, and moreover, we believe that the global North owes Africa an historical debt for centuries of exploiting the continent's human and natural resources. Debt cancellation is a step that should be taken immediately, as partial downpayment on reparations.

4. Fight the "Black Death" - Finance the UN Global Fund for AIDS

AIDS has become the black plague. Its epicenter is Africa, the region with the next highest infection rate is the Caribbean, and in the U.S. (the region ranked third) HIV/AIDS infection rates are increasing mainly among people of color. So while AIDS is a global threat that knows no borders and does not discriminate by race, at present it is mainly killing black people. And that is the cruel truth about why the western world



has failed to respond with dispatch. The pandemic starkly reveals the fault lines of deep inequality in the world order.

The slave system, and the colonial era that followed, helped entrench both racial stereotypes and disparities in wealth, largely determining the starting points for individuals and countries in today's globalizing world. Among the most sensitive indicators of that inequality is health. The AIDS pandemic in Africa provides a dramatic reminder. It is not only that global inequality is increasing. The distribution of the suffering, as in the past five centuries, is clearly linked to both place and race. According to the latest World Health Report, released in June 2000, forty-four of the fifty-two countries with life expectancies less than 50 years are in Africa.

The rich countries' failure to act now is linked to the fact that the majority of those affected are poor, black and female. The response to the global AIDS pandemic will show whether common humanity will prevail over corporate greed. It will also show whether the world is ready to confront centuries of global injustice. The rich and white world - through their governments - have thus far refused to finance the war against this threat to humanity because its victims are mainly black. The Global Fund for AIDS that the United Nations is attempting to develop as a vehicle to deliver the resources needed to defeat AIDS has received a mere pittance of its already conservatively estimated budget of \$10 billion. U.S. pledges to the Global Health Fund fall far short of the \$3 billion that would be an appropriate U.S. share of the \$10 billion a year needed. And the U.S. administration has not repudiated the remarks by the US Agency for International Development (USAID) Administrator, Andrew Natsios, who tried to justify denying AIDS treatment to Africans because, he stated, "they can't tell time."

Conclusion

Africa Action believes it is critical to recognize that the current international political economy very closely resembles a form of global apartheid, that African rights are the most egregiously violated under this system, and that the United States is the single most powerful actor within this system and the custodian of its ways.

Global apartheid, stated briefly, is a system of international white minority rule. Race determines access to basic human rights; wealth and power are accumulated and structured by race and place; structural racism is found in global economic processes, political institutions and cultural assumptions; and international double standards are practiced that assume inferior rights to be appropriate for certain "others," defined by origin, race, gender, or geography.

Global apartheid is more than a metaphor. It is a more accurate moniker for the corporate globalization that is now rightfully protested at every international meeting. Global apartheid has evolved as a consequence of an international economic system built upon the slave trade, slavery and colonialism, and upon centuries of racism and racial discrimination. Global apartheid has national and local consequences throughout the world. But none is as devastating as the global AIDS pandemic.



Durban, South Africa is an appropriate setting for this - the third - World Conference Against Racism. The venue should inspire us to build upon one of the greatest international successes against racism at the end of the 20th century, the defeat of apartheid in South Africa. Last year, Durban hosted the 13th international conference on AIDS (the first ever in Africa). Durban 2000 (on AIDS) and Durban 2001 (on racism) are connected by more than geographical coincidence. If the material damages from past injustice were only felt by past generations, the argument over apologies and reparations might be academic. But in fact the racial order derived from the interlocked sequence of slavery, the slave trade, colonialism and apartheid still profoundly affects all aspects of life, including survival itself, in South Africa, the U.S., and globally.

Participation in the WCAR

Every country in the world should participate in the WCAR at the highest possible level, as befits a world summit on an issue as serious and important as this. The United States in particular should participate at the highest level and provide generous financial support because it is historically the greatest beneficiary of the crimes justified by racism and the world's richest country as a result. The United States' threats to boycott the WCAR represent the height of arrogance and a callous dismissal of one of the greatest problems facing the U.S. and the world today. The apparent decision to send a low-level official instead of Secretary of State Colin Powell puts in question the symbolism often attributed to Powell's being the first African American to hold that post. This decision is testimony to the racism that continues to shape U.S. foreign policy.

Africa Action will participate actively in the NGO forum of the WCAR and will be well represented by Staff and Board Members throughout. While we have sought to highlight what we consider to be strategic priorities for the WCAR, Africa Action also supports the totality of the work of the Conference. We consider the WCAR to be an unprecedented opportunity to strengthen the growing international movement against global apartheid and for global justice.

