

# Declaration of the Conference on Arab-Led Slavery of Africans

Sunnyside Park Hotel, Johannesburg: 22 February 2003

## Introduction and Preamble

As we penetrate the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the interrelated issues of racism and the legacy of African slavery as lingering historical and sociological phenomena constitute for Africa and the world one of the most vexatious problem areas in the conscience of the human community. At a time, when people of African descent, particularly in the Diaspora, are calling for reparations for the chattel slavery of Africans in the western hemisphere and its effects, Africans on the continent are making similar demands for Ottoman and Arab-led slavery and its outstanding historical and sociological implications.

In as far as these issues are concerned, *The United Nations World Conference Against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerances* of August 28<sup>th</sup> – 1<sup>st</sup> September 2001, in Durban, South Africa, represented a significant milestone in the collective ability of humanity to confront issues of racism as a global phenomenon. The World Conference had been preceded by a half-century of United Nations efforts to eradicate racism and racial discrimination. Indeed, when the international community adopted the United Nations Charter in 1945, it accepted the obligation to pursue the realization of human rights and fundamental freedoms for all, without distinction as to race, sex, language or religion. In December 1948, the United Nations General Assembly adopted the *Universal Declaration on Human Rights*, which declared in Article 1 that, all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. *The Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide*, declared genocide an international crime. Through much of the 1960s, efforts were partially focused on racial discrimination in colonially dependent areas, where the end of colonially institutionalized racism was anticipated as a natural consequence of independence.(1)

On 20 November 1963, the General Assembly adopted the *UN Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination*. In the preamble, to this Declaration it was recognized that in spite of obvious progress, discrimination based on race, colour or ethnic origin continued to give cause for serious and unmitigated concern. On 21 December 1965, the General Assembly adopted the *International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination*. The Convention, which is a legally binding instrument, entered into force on 4 January 1969 and now has 155 State parties. This Convention defined racial discrimination as

“any distinction, exclusion, restriction or preference based on race, colour, descent, or national or ethnic origin which has the purpose or effect of nullifying or impairing the recognition, enjoyment or exercise ... of human rights and fundamental freedom ...”. In 1968, shortly before the Convention entered into force, the first *International Conference on Human Rights*, meeting in Tehran, called for the criminalization of racist and Nazi organizations. On 11 December 1969, the General Assembly designated 1971 as the *International Year of Action to Combat Racism and Racial Discrimination*.

The first *World Conference to Combat Racism and Racial Discrimination* was held in Geneva in 1978, at the mid-point of the first Decade. Its Declaration and Programme of Action reaffirmed the inherent falsity of racism and the threat it posed to friendly relations among peoples and nations.

The second *World Conference to Combat Racism and Racial Discrimination*, held in Geneva, 1-12 August 1983, reviewed and assessed the activities undertaken during the Decade and formulated specific measures to ensure the implementation of United Nations instruments to eliminate racism, racial discrimination and apartheid.(2)

The UN subsequently initiated detailed programmes for (a) Decade for Action to Combat Racism and Racial Discrimination (1973 – 1982), (b) Second Decade for Action to Combat Racism and Racial Discrimination (1983 – 1992) and (c) Third Decade for Action to Combat Racism and Racial Discrimination (1993 – 2002). At the Durban Conference, Mrs Mary Robinson, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights said “if the World Conference is to make a difference, it must not only raise awareness about the scourge of racism, but it must lead to positive actions at the national, regional and international levels that can bring relief to those who bear the brunt of racism and racial discrimination. This is a subject that required firmness of resolve, disciplined and persistent action, and clear-sighted thinking.”(3)

As part of the proceedings of the NGO Forum of the Durban Conference, the Centre for Advanced Studies of African Society (CASAS) undertook a symposium on, ‘*Racism in the Global African Experience*’. This symposium drew on the experience and knowledge of a cohort of academics of African descent from within the continent and its Diaspora.(4)

### **Conference on Arab-Led Slavery of Africans in Johannesburg (22<sup>nd</sup> February 2003).**

Following on the platform of CASAS held in the context of the NGO Meeting (Durban), and by way of implementing the *Declaration and Plan of Action of the UN World Conference Against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance (WCAR)* Durban, 2001, CASAS and the Drammeh Institute organized a Conference on *Arab-Led Slavery of Africans* in Johannesburg (22<sup>nd</sup> February 2003).

The initiative for the conference was advised by the fact that whereas, relatively, much more is known about the European-led Atlantic slave trade, the history and reality of Arab-led slavery of Africans continues to be an area of silence and darkness in African and non-African perceptions of African society and history. The painful reality of this history is profoundly aggravated by the fact that, slavery continues to the present day in the Afro-Arab borderlands (this area encompasses the broad stretch of Africa running roughly between the 30<sup>th</sup> degree latitude and the 10<sup>th</sup> degree latitude across the Africa continent), particularly in Mauritania and the Sudan. The conference was intended to provide, for wider consumption, studies, by scholars, on the subject of *Arab-Led Slavery of Africans*. At the close of the conference, the meeting produced the following declaration:

**On this day, this 22<sup>nd</sup> of February 2003, we the participants of this Conference on Arab-Led Slavery of Africans, do solemnly make this declaration that**, we the people, Africans and African descendants, herein referred to as Africans, striving for the unity of the African Nation, intend to reclaim our voice, and to speak for ourselves on the above and related issues, after centuries of silence and non-self-expression.

We attest to the fact that, the African continent and people has served as a millennia-long reservoir for uncompensated labour obtained through brutal and dehumanizing processes for the Atlantic, Mediterranean and Indian Ocean areas and trade routes. Arising out of these labour extraction processes, in the form of slavery, Africans have historically become people whose slavery amongst all others had, for centuries, assumed intercontinental forms. In this context;

WE CONDEMN, in the strongest possible terms, all forms of slavery, historical and contemporary, in all parts of the world.

WE RECOGNISE that the Arab-led slave trade of African people predates the trans-Atlantic slave trade by a millennium, and represents the largest and, in time, longest involuntary removal of any indigenous people in the history of humanity.

WE RECOGNISE the need to combat and eliminate the collective amnesia about Arab enslavement of Africans. In this respect, more research needs to be conducted on the subject of the Arab and Ottoman slave trade of Africans. More workshops need to be undertaken which will facilitate the conscientization of people in Africa and the wider world. Academics and scholars of African descent are called upon to play an active role in this.

WE ACKNOWLEDGE the need to mobilize structures, worldwide, for the elimination and banning of slave practices in the world.

WE DEMAND that the issue of the contemporary slavery of Africans in the Afro-Arab borderlands be placed before the African Union (AU).

WE DECRY the impact of African slavery on Africans and its effects towards the cultural denationalization of Africans.

WE ACKNOWLEDGE the need to establish relations between continental Africans and the African Diaspora in the Arab world.

WE CONDEMN the practice of buying slaves to free them. In the estimation of the Conference, buying slaves in order to free them (so-called “slave redemption”) amounts to legitimizing slavery.

WE CONDEMN, in the strongest possible terms, the practice of forced concubinage of enslaved women, and the use of enslaved African women for the purpose of breeding children who become and continue to be property held by Arab masters.

WE CONDEMN in the strongest possible terms the collaborationist role of some Africans in this trade.

WE ACCUSE Arab societies, for historical and continuing crimes committed against African boys subjected to forced castration (of which the survival rate has been one in ten), to create an eunuch class.

WE ACCUSE Arab societies for the historical and continued taking into slavery of young girls to serve as sex slaves to their masters with no right to marriage unless prescribed by their masters.

WE ACCUSE Arab societies, in some areas of the Afro-Arab borderlands, of genocide against Africans, particularly in the Sudan.

WE CHARGE the responsible Arab societies of ethnocide of African people through forced cultural Arabization processes.

GIVEN THE FACT that the millennia-long Arab-led slavery of Africans has wreaked incalculable damage on Africans and African society, apologies and reparations are due to Africans.

WE CALL for a civilization dialogue between the Arab and African peoples.

## Notes

1. World Conference Against Racism. 2001 NGO Programme. *NGO Forum. The World Conference Against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerances*. Durban, South Africa. 28 August – 1 September 2001. P.2
2. Ibid. P.3
3. Ibid. P.6
4. The proceedings of this symposium are appearing in 2003.