

THE DAKAR CONFERENCE; a different perspective

A great deal of attention has been focussed on the South African response to the Dakar Conference, and on the reaction of the Government to it. Scant attention has been paid to the significantly different African response, particularly by those countries which were in any way associated with it.

Whereas it was the actual meeting with the African National Congress that captured the headlines in South Africa, it appeared to be rather the fact that a group of (perceived) white South African 'boere' had actually turned their backs on apartheid which excited the imagination and admiration of the African people. Wherever we went, we were fêted as the Anti-apartheid Afrikaners rather than as the South Africans who had come to talk with the ANC. There was no mistaking the immense emotional response by our hosts to our rejection of apartheid. Something that we were soon to learn was that a willingness to take a stand against apartheid regardless of the consequences was the 'open Sesame' to Africa. Those who are prepared to disavow apartheid will find that Africa is eager to open its arms to embrace them.

What so many South Africans appear unable or unwilling to comprehend is the intensity of this emotional reaction to apartheid. At best, whites seem to think, if they think at all, that blacks get upset by apartheid because it 'discriminates against them.' Dakar opened one's eyes to how shallow is this perception.

Perhaps it was the visit to the Slave Island of Goree which brought it home to one why Africa will not rest until the last vestige of apartheid has been rooted out of the continent. Goree, off the coast of Dakar, was the most important staging post for slaves bound for the Americas. From the forbidding portals of its great slave houses more than twenty million human beings were sold into bondage during its infamous three hundred year history. Perhaps no other single place has witnessed so much human suffering over so long a period. Despite this, what is remarkable is the lack of bitterness amongst the people.

One senses that rather than hatred for the perpetrators of such cruelty, there was disbelief at the indifference of those who saw this cruelty and yet remained unmoved by it. This indifference was well captured in the design of the slave houses. Whereas the slavers lived in luxurious quarters facing the sea, the slaves were incarcerated in dark dungeons immediately below them.

This indifference was in direct contradiction to the concept of humanism, 'ubuntu', which is such an impressive feature of African philosophy.

So it is with apartheid. All the indignity and inhumanity of slavery was symbolized on Goree, and apartheid has, throughout Africa, been seen as the new slavery. Those who fail to take steps to bring this slavery of the mind to an end are regarded as being no better than those who remained unmoved by the suffering of their forebears. It is this kind of emotional response which prompts leaders such as Pres. Abdul Diouf of Senegal to suggest the holding of apartheid trials in post-apartheid South Africa.

If the South African Government harbours any hopes at all that it will be able to fob off black political aspirations with some sort of modernized apartheid, either in the form of 'own affairs' or any other system of neo-racialism, then it is even more out of touch with reality than we have dared fear.

One of the most heartening consequences of the Dakar conference was the way in which the internal delegation was left in no doubt at all by both the African National Congress and our African hosts that our bonafides as Africans were never in question. This was not a conference between Africans and colonials or settlers, but a conference between Africans and Africans. By having rejected apartheid, the internal delegation was put in a position to be able to experience a privilege far greater than that of meeting with its fellow South Africans, it was able to experience a small part of our African heritage which we have for so long denied ourselves. It was an enormously enriching experience. □