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## ***Introduction***

India's contribution to the struggle against apartheid has been highly praised by the leaders of the freedom movement in South Africa. Nelson Mandela, the outstanding leader of that movement, paid a handsome tribute to India and its leaders in a letter smuggled out of Robben island prison in 1980. Great appreciation has also been expressed by African leaders for the role of India since 1946 in promoting international support for the freedom struggle in South Africa, and its many actions and initiatives in solidarity with the oppressed people of that country.

While such expressions of appreciation are most gratifying, it must be emphasised that the contribution by the Government and people of India to the freedom movement in South Africa is more than an act of solidarity. It has deep roots in India's own struggle for freedom and dignity.

The humiliations and indignities to which the people of Indian origin were subjected in South Africa, and the struggle for their human dignity led by Mahatma Gandhi, have had a great influence on the Indian national movement. Under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi and Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, it had developed an international outlook, espousing uncompromising opposition to colonialism and racism and recognising that India's own freedom was

meaningless unless all the peoples under colonial and racist domination were free. It felt a particular affinity with the freedom movements in South Africa and other

African countries.

Soon after assuming office as Prime Minister in the Interim Government of India, Pandit Nehru declared at a press conference on September 27, 1946:

"The kernel of our policy is the ending of colonialism all over Asia, or for

that matter, in Africa and elsewhere and racial equality ... and the end of

domination or exploitation of one nation by another."

This, he stressed, was the only way to bring about world peace and progress. While India was concerned with the treatment of people of Indian origin in South Africa as an affront to the dignity and honour of the nation, he saw the issue in the context of even greater oppression of the African majority. India, therefore, took the lead in ensuring United Nations consideration of apartheid and in promoting solidarity with all the oppressed people.

The Government and people of India have entertained great respect for the liberation movement in South Africa and its leaders, and have been unequivocal in support of their struggle. The contributions made in that cause, and in implementation of the United Nations resolutions, were never regarded as a sacrifice but as a national duty.

It may be useful to trace the evolution of India's concern and commitment, not only for an understanding of the role of India, but also for pointing to the lessons of its long experience of solidarity with the struggle for liberation in South Africa.

### ***Gandhiji in South Africa***

"The oldest existing political organisation in South Africa, the Natal Indian Congress, was founded by Mahatma Gandhi in 1894. He became its first secretary and in 21 years of his stay in South Africa we were to witness the birth of ideas and methods of struggle that have exerted an incalculable influence on the history of the peoples of India and South Africa. Indeed it was on South African soil that Mahatmaji founded and embraced the philosophy of *Satyagraha*." - Nelson Mandela in a letter from prison in 1980

After the abolition of slavery, the British settlers in the Natal arranged with the Indian Government to recruit indentured labour for their sugar, tea and coffee plantations. Thousands

of poor and illiterate Indians were enticed to go to South Africa with promises of attractive wages and repatriation after five years or the right to settle in Natal as free men. The first indentured labourers reached Natal on November 6, 1860. They were soon followed by traders and their assistants. After some time, the whites faced serious competition from the traders, as well as the labourers who became successful market gardeners after the expiry of their indenture. They began an agitation to make it impossible for Indians to live in Natal except in semi-slavery as indentured labourers. In 1893, when Natal was granted self-government, the Government began to enact a series of discriminatory and restrictive measures against the free Indians.

The Indian traders who had settled in the Boer Republic of Transvaal were also subjected to similar discrimination, while Indians were excluded from the Orange Free State.

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, a young and diffident barrister, arrived in South Africa in 1893 to represent an Indian trader in Natal in a civil suit against an Indian trading firm in Pretoria. Within days, he encountered bitter humiliations such as being pushed out of a train and being assaulted for walking on a footpath. The experience steeled him: he decided never to accept or be resigned to injustice and racism, but to resist.

He helped found the Natal Indian Congress in 1894, bringing together Indians of all classes, speaking a variety of languages, into one organisation to struggle for their rights. It was the first mass organisation in South Africa.

Proceeding to India in 1896, he travelled all over the country publicising the situation in South Africa, meeting leaders of the Indian National Congress, editors and others. When he returned to Durban in January 1897, he was brutally assaulted by a white mob and barely escaped lynching. The incident was widely reported in India and England, and the British Government was obliged to instruct the Natal authorities to take action against his assailants. Gandhiji refused to prosecute them and went on with his work.

When the Anglo-Boer War broke out in 1899, the British Government gave as one of the reasons the discrimination against British subjects of Indian origin in the Transvaal and the Orange Free State. Gandhiji organised an ambulance corps on the British side, though he felt sympathy for the Afrikaners. At the end of the war, however, the British administrators enforced more stringent restrictions on the Indians in the Transvaal.

In 1907, the Transvaal Government enacted the "Black Act" (Asiatic Registration Act) requiring compulsory registration and finger-printing of Indians. The Indian community defied the law under the leadership of Gandhiji, and many were imprisoned in this first *Satyagraha* (non-violent resistance) launched by him.

Within a few months, General Smuts agreed to release the prisoners and repeal the Act in return for voluntary registration by the Indians. But the Government broke the promise and maintained the Act, though with some amendments, so the Indian community resumed the struggle in 1908. Thousands of Indians burnt their registration certificates. The *Satyagraha* continued this time for several years as the white authorities, who were negotiating for "selfgovernment", resorted to harassment rather than mass arrests.

Gandhiji went in a deputation of Indians to Britain in 1909 to oppose the granting of self-government to South Africa under white rule, and met with many members of Parliament and public figures. But the British Government ignored the pleas of the Indians - and, indeed, of the African majority - and transferred power to the white minority in 1910.

Meanwhile, the *Satyagraha* received wide attention in India. Gopal Krishna Gokhale, a prominent national leader with whom Gandhiji was in constant communication, initiated a debate in the Legislative Council of India and secured a resolution in 1911 to prohibit recruitment of indentured labour for Natal.

Subsequently, with British encouragement, Gokhale visited South Africa in 1912 and met Generals Botha and Smuts who undertook to repeal the Black Act and abolish the poll-tax.

But again the undertaking was not kept. Moreover, the Indian community was infuriated at a judgement of the Cape Supreme Court in 1913 declaring all marriages, other than those according to Christian rites and registered with the Registrar of Marriages, beyond the pale of law in South Africa.

Gandhiji then revived the *Satyagraha* on a much bigger scale, inviting women and indentured labourers to join. Tens of thousands of workers in the Newcastle coal mines and in plantations on the Natal coast went on strike and defied brutal police violence. Thousands of Indians went to jail.

Public opinion in India reacted strongly and even Lord Hardinge, the Viceroy, criticised the South African Government and expressed his "deep and burning" sympathy for the *Satyagrahis*. There were also protests in Britain. As a result, General Smuts reached an agreement with Gandhiji in January 1914 repealing the poll-tax and validating Indian marriages. This was a compromise, as other discriminatory measures remained, but provided some security for the Indian community. Gandhiji suspended the *Satyagraha* and left South Africa in July 1914.

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The experience of Gandhiji in South Africa had a tremendous influence in India, and he was hailed as a "Mahatma" as he proceeded to develop the Indian National Congress as a mass movement leading to the independence of the country.

In South Africa, despite his great respect and sympathy for the Africans, his political activities were confined essentially to the Indian community as it was in a particularly vulnerable position. His influence on the freedom movement in that country was, therefore, by example. But as Oliver Tambo said in New Delhi on November 14, 1980: "His imprint on the course of the South African struggle is indelible."

Gandhiji, moreover, was a great publicist who recognised that while the success of *Satyagraha* depended primarily on the courage and sacrifice of the resisters, it should obtain the understanding and sympathy of public opinion. He attracted the support of a number of whites in South Africa who soon became supporters of the African cause. Public opinion in India was aroused as on few other issues.

Gandhiji also helped promote awareness of South African racism in Britain.

2 Before leaving South Africa, Gandhiji sent as a gift to General Smuts a pair of sandals he had made in jail. Recalling this in 1939, General Smuts wrote: "I have worn these sandals for many a summer since then, even though I may feel that I am not worthy to stand in the shoes of so great a man."

Gandhiji was also in frequent correspondence with people in other countries, including Count Leo Tolstoy, who wrote to him:

"And so your activity in Transvaal, as it seems to us, at the end of the world,

is the most essential work now being done in the world, and in which not

only the nations of the Christian but of all the world will undoubtedly take

part."

The efforts of Gandhiji thus helped to attract international attention to the issue of racism in South Africa long before the United Nations began considering the matter.

### ***Solidarity of Freedom Movements***

"... there is a real moral bond between Asiatics and Africans. It will

grow as time passes." - Mahatma Gandhi in *Harijan*, February 24, 1946

"It would be a grave omission on our part if we failed to mention the

close bonds that have existed between our people and the people of

India, and to acknowledge the encouragement, the inspiration and

the practical assistance we have received as a result of the

international outlook of the All India Congress." - Nelson Mandela in

his letter from prison in 1980

Under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi and Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, the Indian National Congress developed a strong international outlook, with the elimination of colonialism and racism all over the world as the foremost concern, and established contacts with freedom movements in other countries.

Africa had a special place, partly because of the concern of Mahatma Gandhi. Pandit Nehru, for his part, was always passionate in denouncing the humiliation of Africa and felt that Asia had a duty to help Africa regain its dignity and freedom. He said in his address to the Asian Relations Conference in New Delhi on March 23, 1947:

"We of Asia have a special responsibility to the people of Africa. We must

help them to their rightful place in the human family."

And in his concluding statement at the Asian-African Conference in Bandung on April 24, 1955, he declared:

"We have passed resolutions about conditions in this or that country. But I think there is nothing more terrible than the infinite tragedy of Africa in the past few hundred years. Everything else pales into insignificance when I think of the infinite tragedy of Africa ever since the days when millions of Africans were carried away as galley slaves to America and elsewhere, half of them dying in the galleys... even now the tragedy of Africa is greater than that of any other continent, whether it is racial or political. It is up to Asia to help Africa to the best of her ability because we are sister continents."

There were friendly contacts between Indian and African leaders during the course of their struggles for freedom.<sup>3</sup> Both Mahatma Gandhi and Pandit Nehru repeatedly stressed the solidarity of Asian and African peoples and advised the Indians in Africa to identify with the African majority. One of the first acts of Pandit Nehru, after becoming Prime Minister in the Interim Government of India, was to send instructions to Indian envoys in Africa that India did not want Indians to have any special privileges at the cost of Africans anywhere. He called upon the Indians to co-operate with Africans in order to gain freedom for Africans.

The Indian national movement, which began in the 1880s, and the South African national movement, which began three decades later, developed on parallel lines - in organisation, forms of resistance and ideology - in protracted struggles against powerful forces. India had, therefore, a special appreciation of the concerns and aspirations of the latter.

The bond between the national movements of India and South Africa became stronger during the Second World War. The Indians in South Africa were no longer recent immigrants, but were born in South Africa and developed deep roots in that country. With the encouragement

of the Indian national movement, they recognised that their destiny was linked to that of the African majority and increasingly participated in joint struggles against racist measures.

The militants - from Gandhians to Marxists - under the leadership of Dr. Yusuf Dadoo and Dr. Monty Naicker, took over leadership of the community by the end of the war, from the so-called "moderates" who were compromising with the racist regime, and entered into a pact with the African National Congress of South Africa (ANC) in 1947.

Moreover, while the Allies professed to be fighting for freedom, Winston Churchill, the British Prime Minister, made it clear that the Atlantic Charter did not apply to India, while General Smuts, the South African Prime Minister acclaimed in the West as a liberal, was equally determined that equality was not for the blacks. Freedom had to be wrenched by struggle in both countries.

3 For instance, Indian leaders attended the All Races Conference held in London in 1911 together with African leaders of South Africa. Pandit Nehru represented the Indian National Congress at the International Congress against Imperialism held in Brussels in 1929. This conference was also attended by Mr. Josiah Gumede, the President of the African National Congress of South Africa. The India League in London maintained close contact with African exiles in London and several Indians attended the Pan African Congress held in Manchester in 1945.

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In India, the national movement launched the final assault against colonial rule in 1942 - the "Quit India" movement under the slogan "do or die". In South Africa, the African Youth League was established by young militants calling for "positive action": Nelson Mandela, Oliver Tambo and Walter Sisulu, who are still leading the struggle, were among its founders.

### ***Complaint to the United Nations in 1946***

"In South Africa racialism is the State doctrine and our people are

putting up a heroic struggle against the tyranny of a racial minority.

If this racial doctrine is going to be tolerated, it must inevitably lead

to vast conflicts and world disaster..." - Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru in a

broadcast on September 7, 1946

India's complaint to the United Nations in 1946 on racial discrimination against Indians in South Africa was made even before the establishment of a national Government, because of strong public sentiment in the country.

The Smuts-Gandhi agreement of 1914 had given only a respite to the Indian South Africans. Anti-Indian agitation was revived by the whites after the First World War, and the Union Government introduced new discriminatory measures in violation of the agreement. After protests from India, talks were held between the colonial Government of India and the Union Government: a compromise was reached in the Cape Town Agreement of 1927 and confirmed by a joint communiqué of 1932. These agreements were also virtually repudiated by South Africa.

In 1943, Natal passed the "Pegging Act", restricting the right of Asians to acquire land. Then, in 1946, the Union Government passed the Asiatic Land Tenure and Indian Representation Act to segregate Indians in trade and residence. The Indian community launched a passive resistance campaign on June 13, 1946. Many Indian men and women were imprisoned by the police or assaulted by white gangsters.

In response to public pressure in India, the Government of India felt obliged to request the United Nations General Assembly, in a letter of June 22, 1946, to consider the question of the treatment of Indians in the Union of South Africa. On July 7, 1946, it prohibited exports to or imports from the Union of South Africa. At that time, South Africa accounted for 5.5 per cent of India's exports, and about 1.5 per cent of India's imports.

The Interim Government was established on September 1, 1946, before the

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General Assembly session, with Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru as Prime Minister. The new Government made sure to emphasise the wider context of the dispute between India and the Union of South Africa. It resisted moves by Western Powers to deal with the Indian complaint as a legal problem and insisted on its consideration as a political matter.

Mrs. Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit, Chairman of the Indian delegation to the General Assembly in 1946, said in her opening statement:

"... The way this Assembly treats and disposes of this issue is open to the

gaze, not only of those gathered here, but of millions of people in the world,

the progressive peoples of all countries, more particularly the non-European

peoples of the world - who ... are an overwhelming section of the human

race.

"The issue we have brought before you is by no means a narrow or local one.

...

"The bitter memories of racial doctrines in the practice of States and

Governments are still fresh in the minds of all of us. Their evil and tragic

consequences are part of the problems with which we are called upon to deal.

"India firmly believes that imperialism, political, economic or social, in

whatever part of the world it may exist and by whomsoever it may be

established and perpetuated, is totally inconsistent with the objects and

purposes of the United Nations and its Charter."

During the session, a multiracial delegation from South Africa led by Dr. A.B. Xuma, President-General of the ANC, and including Mr. H.A. Naidoo and Mr. Sorabji Rustomji of the Indian Congresses and Mr. H.M. Basner, a Senator representing African voters, arrived in New York. The Indian delegation constantly consulted them and enabled them to contact many Governments. Mr. V.K. Krishna Menon, a member of the delegation, shared the platform with them on November 17, 1946, at a public meeting in the Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem.

Because of the composition of the United Nations at the time, with most of Asian and African nations still under colonial domination, it was with great difficulty that India was able to secure a two-thirds majority for a resolution on its complaint.

At the same session, India played an active role in opposing and frustrating the manoeuvres of the South African Government to annex South West Africa (now Namibia). It strongly supported a resolution moved by Poland and Egypt against religious and so-called racial discrimination.

India became the target of vicious propaganda by the South African Government

and earned the disfavour of its Western friends. The annual discussions of the Indian complaint built up a sentiment against racial discrimination in South Africa, and against apartheid, which became the official policy after the National Party came to power in 1948.

### ***Initiative on Apartheid***

On June 26, 1952, the ANC, the South African Indian Congress and the Coloured People's Organisation launched a non-violent "Campaign of Defiance against Unjust Laws" in which 8,000 people of all races were imprisoned for contravention of discriminatory laws. India, together with 12 other Asian and Arab States, called on the General Assembly to consider the wider issue under the title "question of race conflict in South Africa resulting from the policies of apartheid of the Government of the Union of South Africa". Their explanatory memorandum deserves to be recalled.

They said:

"The race conflict in the Union of South Africa resulting from the policies of

apartheid of the South African Government is creating a dangerous and

explosive situation, which constitutes both a threat to international peace and

a flagrant violation of the basic principles of human rights and fundamental

freedoms which are enshrined in the Charter of the United Nations.

"Although Africa's importance in world affairs is increasing rapidly, many

parts of that continent still remain subject to racial discrimination and

exploitation. The founding of the United Nations and the acceptance by the

Member States of the obligations embodied in the Charter have given to

peoples of these areas new hope and encouragement in their efforts to acquire

basic human rights. But, in direct opposition to the trend of world opinion,

the policy of the Government of the Union of South Africa is designed to

establish and to perpetuate every form of racial discrimination which must

inevitably result in intense and bitter racial conflict...

"... a social system is being evolved under which the non-whites, who constitute 80 per cent of the population of the Union of South Africa, will be kept in a permanently inferior state to the white minority. Such a policy challenges all that the United Nations stands for and clearly violates the basic and fundamental objectives of the Charter of the United Nations...

"It is therefore imperative that the General Assembly give this question its urgent consideration in order to prevent an already dangerous situation from deteriorating further and to bring about a settlement in accordance with the

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purposes and principles of the United Nations Charter."

To stress the importance attached by India to this issue, leaders of the Indian delegation personally led the annual debates until 1957 (when, with the independence of Ghana, India

requested Ghana to take the lead). For, India recognised apartheid as a unique and grave menace to peace, rather than one of many human rights violations in the world.

Pandit Nehru said in the Lok Sabha in April 1958:

"There are many conflicts which divide the world and this question of racial

conflict in South Africa is as grave as any other issue.

"In South Africa, it is the deliberate, acknowledged and loudly proclaimed

policy of the Government itself to maintain this segregation and racial

discrimination. This makes the South African case unique in the world. It is a

policy with which obviously no person and no country which believes in the

United Nations Charter can ever compromise, because it uproots almost

everything the modern world stands for and considers worthwhile, whether it

is the United Nations Charter or whether it is our ideas of democracy or of

human dignity."

While the original Indian complaint remained on the agenda of the General Assembly for several years, Pandit Nehru recognised that it had become part of the larger issue. He said in a speech in Rajya Sabha on December 15, 1958:

"The question of the people of Indian descent in South Africa has really

merged into bigger questions where not only Indians are affected but the

whole African population along with... any other people who happen to go to

South Africa and who do not belong to European or American countries."

He said in the Lok Sabha on March 28, 1960, a week after the Sharpeville

massacre:

"The people of Indian descent in South Africa, as we all know, have had to put up with a great deal of discrimination and suffering and we have resented that. But we must remember that the African people have to put up with something infinitely more and that, therefore, our sympathies must go out to them even more than to our kith and kin there."

The two items were merged in 1962 under the title "Policies of apartheid of the Government of the Republic of South Africa".

India joined the African States in calling for Security Council discussion of apartheid after the Sharpeville massacre of 1960. It co-sponsored the General Assembly resolution of 1962 urging all States to impose sanctions against South

Africa and establishing the Special Committee against Apartheid. In the specialised agencies of

the United Nations, the Movement of Non-Aligned Countries and the Commonwealth, as well as in numerous other organisations and forums, India was active in calling for the isolation of the apartheid regime and support for the liberation struggle.

### ***Support to Africa***

"... we regard Nelson Mandela as one of the foremost proponents of

freedom - freedom of man. We regard him also a friend of India. We

admire him. We have honoured him as one of our own heroes and

our thoughts are often with him and his family..." - Prime Minister

Indira Gandhi, in an address to the African Students Association in

New Delhi, January 11, 1982

"This is the time when all the non-white people of South Africa, and

even those sections among the whites who oppose apartheid should

close their ranks and fight unitedly to vanquish the racist policies.

The people of India will be with them."

- Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi, in a statement on August 16,

1985

By the early 1960s, the independent African States were able to take over the responsibility for promoting support to peoples fighting against colonial and racist domination, recognising that their cause was that of the entire continent.

India lent full support to African States and the Organisation of African Unity (OAU). It set an example by scrupulously implementing the resolutions of the United Nations and other international organisations. It also provided substantial assistance to the oppressed people of South Africa and their freedom movement.

Thus, while India gladly handed over leadership to African States, its role was hardly passive.

In recent years, India has been obliged to assume a more active role, with the encouragement of African States, because of its chairmanship of the Movement of Non-Aligned Countries and the difficulties encountered by African States.

Mrs. Indira Gandhi had personal knowledge of the humiliation of Africans and Asians in South Africa as she was obliged to stop in South Africa in 1940-41 on her way home from England. She was passionate in her hatred of apartheid and entertained great respect for the leaders of the resistance. She told the African Students Association in New Delhi on January 11, 1982:

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"The decade of the eighties may well decide the destiny of southern Africa.

The African people must win. And we, in India, reiterate our total support to

you."

***Some Observations***

India has been privileged to play a special role in support of the long and difficult struggle of the black majority in South Africa for freedom and human dignity. Solidarity with the South African movement is an issue on which all segments of public opinion in India are united.

Having gone through a long struggle for independence, India has always

entertained faith in the triumph of the liberation struggle in South Africa. It also showed full understanding, in the light of her own experience, when the freedom movement in South Africa was obliged to abandon strict adherence to nonviolence. India's long experience with South Africa has influenced its approach to apartheid.

For India, the distinction between colonial and racial problems in southern Africa has little basis. In South Africa, racism became "State" policy because the colonial Power, ignoring the pleas of the African majority and the Indian population, handed over power to a white minority intent on reinforcing racist domination and exploitation.

India is also not influenced by propaganda describing Afrikaners as racists and English-speaking whites as liberals. For, the Indians in South Africa suffered discrimination from the English-speaking whites in Natal as much as from the Afrikaners in the Transvaal.

Aware of the long record of breaches of undertakings by the racist authorities, India fully appreciates that the black people can have little faith in so-called "reforms" by the apartheid regime. It rejects appeasement of the racist regime and recognises that the transition to a non-racial society will need to be under the leadership of the genuine leaders of the people.

As Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi said on August 19, 1985:

"South Africa must be made to see reason. It must be made to release Nelson

Mandela unconditionally. The only way this can be done is to isolate totally

the racists. It is futile to hope that co-operation in any manner with that

regime will give anyone leverage or influence, so as to change things for the

better."

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While the experience of India is perhaps unique, it has relevance for other States that have been seized with the problem of apartheid, at least since the United Nations began to discuss it in 1952.

South Africa is a microcosm of the world with people of different national and racial origins. The racist regime in that country has been pursuing a criminal, indeed suicidal policy, while the

freedom movement has consistently espoused the need to establish a just and non-racial society in the interests of all the people of that country.

India, with a million people in South Africa tracing their origin to it, has made a clear choice in total support of the liberation struggle. Why is it that other countries of origin - especially of the white minority - are unwilling to make such a choice and act accordingly? Why is it that some of them even use their historic links as a justification for collusion with apartheid to the detriment of all the people of South Africa?

India, a poor country, gave up over 5 per cent of its export trade in 1946 to demonstrate its repugnance of racism in South Africa. Why is it that the major trading partners of South Africa are unwilling to give up their trade with South Africa, which amounts to one per cent or less of their total trade? Are they less committed to the struggle against racism?

The leaders of India have educated public opinion on the situation in South Africa and secured widest public support for all measures recommended by the United Nations. Why is it that Governments in the West are still resisting demands of public opinion in their own countries for action against apartheid?

India, a country which suffered from alien domination and exploitation, has accepted responsibility to assist Africa in its striving for total emancipation from centuries of humiliation. Why is it that Governments of countries that ravaged and plundered Africa seem unwilling to shoulder their moral responsibility?

It is to be hoped that the heroic struggle now being waged by the men, women and children of all racial origins in South Africa will persuade the Governments concerned to reassess their positions and contribute fully to the international efforts for the eradication of apartheid.

October 1985