

OPENING REMARKS BY JOHN HUME.

I would like to welcome you all to today's Conference. I hope that your participation will help to make the day's discussions worthwhile. In particular I welcome those of you who are not members of the SDLP but who have come along because of your concern about apartheid, famine or world development.

In organising this Conference the SDLP is aware that many people in Northern Ireland do care deeply about many world issues. We are conscious of our role and responsibility as a political party in addressing those issues. We cannot let the problems and prejudices of our own situation preclude any meaningful interest in issues of fundamental human importance. Whether we are unionists or nationalist, British or Irish, Black or White, we are all first and foremost human beings. We must therefore base our politics on concern for the human condition and the need to secure for all the rightful dignity of that condition. Martin Luther King once wrote to a friend in Southern Africa "Injustice anywhere threatens justice everywhere". It is for that reason that we in Northern Ireland should try to learn more and do more about the situation of others in the world.

We have decided to focus our Conference on Africa. We have done so because in that 'vast and complex continent' as Martin Luther King described it there are many interlocking issues which are crystallized in underdevelopment, mass poverty and injustice. We have done so also because we are conscious of the fact that many of us, understandably, think broadly in terms of a third world with little sense of peoples' identities or cultures whatever about our concern for their living conditions.

It is perhaps appropriate that the SDLP should look at the condition of Africa and the relationship of our part of the world with it. Our Party was founded out of the Civil Rights Movement. The movement took much of its inspiration from the Civil Rights Movement in America under Martin Luther King. It is not widely enough recognised however that much of Martin Luther King's own inspiration had come from Africa and the words and writings of its leaders, ^{and} authors, and particularly at a time when Africa was apparently achieving its political independence.

Many of Africa's hopes of that time have unfortunately been cruelly frustrated. Our speakers today will give us some account of this and the various factors underlying those problems. Among those factors is the historic underdevelopment and abuse of Africa under colonialism, continuing economic colonialism and exploitation, poor aid programmes and inadequate and sometimes inappropriate development programmes. In our Conference we will want to look at those factors which we can help to change. I hope that our discussions will give us a better understanding of the problems facing Africa and help us to sharpen our commitment to dealing with them.

I have no doubt that people here have a commitment to world justice. That has been shown in the responses to various fund-raising initiatives for famine relief or development. It has been shown by the thousands of letters which people here sent to political representatives and the hundreds of petitions from all sorts of groups, schools and communities. I do not believe that this has been appreciated or reflected by the media. I often see commentators criticising people here, particularly politicians, for being too insular. It does not pay me to criticise the media but I would point out that on several occasions where in speeches in Westminster or the European

Parliament I have addressed issues such as famine, apartheid or the need for a new international economic order the local media have decided that such matters do not really deserve much coverage. This comparative apathy by some sections of the media does annoy me when I compare it to some of the very minor issues which I am often asked to comment on or pronounce upon.

Political representatives alone cannot be blamed for the insularity of our politics. Two weeks ago I gave an address in America which covered South Africa, world poverty and the Arms Race. Out of twelve pages of script which the press received, more coverage went to the one page on Ireland than the rest of the speech. Some of you might be surprised to know that the SDLP has a policy document "The Politics of Hunger" as Party policy for two years now. At the time of its adoption at our Conference, it was unfortunately ignored by the media who were more interested in "splits" and personalities. On one occasion a journalist actually asked me to change the new year statement I had issued because it was "all international and that doesn't interest people here". As far as I am concerned such issues do and should interest people here.

The issue which most occupies these concerns at present of course is the situation in South Africa. We all discuss the nature of apartheid and its effects on people's lives. I think that people here often underestimate the reality of apartheid perceiving it to be just a thorough-going scheme of political discrimination. It is that but more amounting to a fully comprehensive denial of human rights and dignity in all areas of life for individuals, communities and entire peoples. It is a crime against humanity and we must make every effort in solidarity with the struggle of people in South Africa to bring apartheid down. That includes comprehensive and total sanctions.

But as this Conference will bear out, there is more suffering in Africa than that under Apartheid and that poses uncomfortable issues for people in the Western World. We must face the fact that at the global level power relationships and economic circumstances betray many of the hallmarks of Apartheid. Power and wealth is concentrated in the hands of a minority. In a situation of plenty the majority of people suffer underdevelopment, lack education and health facilities, face malnutrition and work for a less than meagre living while producing wealth or resources for others.

As well as looking at the development needs of Africa and the types and quality of aid which we have committed to that region we will look at the question of the international economic order and its role in propagating the poverty and underdevelopment of Africa.

I look forward to hearing the contributions from our distinguished speakers and the discussion which will follow. We hope not just to describe the problems of Africa but to analyse them and identify the changes that we can help to effect. We in Ireland can, I believe, play a special role on these issues given our history. I have told American audiences that "Ireland knew famine in the last century, it is for that reason that our country has been so moved by the present suffering of Africa. We know that our famines were not simply natural disasters. History shows that Irish people were starved or forced to leave their native land because of unjust distribution of land, poverty and extortion which forced the production of cash crops for the wealthy abroad instead of food for the hungry at home, trade structures which knew no morality and unequal power relationships between countries. These are the same injustices and absurdities which crucify Africa today."

World hunger demands change not just charity. There can be no question about Ireland's response to the African situation in terms of charity. Let us also set about pursuing the fundamental changes which basic justice and brutal reality demand.