

## CONGRESS OF THE PEOPLE, 25-26 JUNE 1955

(Extract from the third report of the United Nations Commission on the Racial Situation in the Union of South Africa, 1955<sup>1</sup>)

### X. Activities of the African National Congress (“Congress of the People”, 25 and 26 June 1955)

291. In its 1954 report, the Commission mentioned that the African National Congress, together with the South African Indian Congress, the Congress of Democrats and the Coloured People's Organisation, had taken the initiative in convening a "Congress of the People" (A/2719, para 203). This Congress was to meet not later than June 1955. For the first time in the history of South Africa, all racial groups were to co-operate to bring about an assembly directly elected by the people throughout the country, with the object of framing a "Freedom Charter", embodying the demands and aspirations of all sections of the South African population.

292. The preparation of this Congress was the principal object of the 42nd Annual Conference of the African National Congress<sup>2</sup> held at Durban from 16 to 19 December 1954, and attended by about 500 people. It was decided, *inter alia*:

“The Congress of the People will not be just another meeting or another Conference. It will be a mass assembly of delegates elected by the people of all races in every town, village, farm, factory, mine and *kraal*. It will be the biggest single gathering of spokesmen ever known in this country. The representatives of the people who come to the Congress will consider the detailed demands of the people which have been sent in for incorporation in the Freedom Charter, and will embody them into a declaration. This Freedom Charter will be the South African Peoples' Declaration of Human Rights, which every civilised South African will work to uphold and carry into practice.”

Although the date and place of the meeting of this Congress were left open for the time being, the Conference took various decisions concerning its organisation, such as: the establishment of a corps of "Freedom Volunteers," who would be at the disposal of the campaign organisers to carry out any work which might be required of them, no matter where; the formation of Peoples' Congress committees at the provincial level, with sub-committees for the towns, suburbs,

---

<sup>1</sup> United Nations. Official Records of the General Assembly, Tenth Session, Supplement No. 14, A/2953

<sup>2</sup> Report of the African National Congress to the 42nd Annual Conference. See document A/AC.70/5.

factories and streets; the manner of electing representatives, on the basis of one vote for every person over 18 years of age, without distinction of race, colour or sex; and the collection of funds to defray the delegates' travelling expenses.

In the words of an article which appeared in *Indian Opinion*, over the signature of Jordan K. Ngubane:

“The Conference was unique also in the way in which it was essentially a young people’s conference. They grasped the actualities of the situation with a keenness and understanding which the greyheads did not have only twenty years ago. But what was most inspiring here was that at every stage the young people made it plain, in their speeches, their conduct and their decisions, that they were consciously creating for themselves a world after their own design. He is an idiot and a fool who still says that African Youth is not aware of its responsibilities.”<sup>3</sup>

293. The “Congress of the People” took place on 25 and 26 June at Kliptown, near Johannesburg.

Various messages were read, including a telegram from Mr. U.N. Dhebar, President of the Indian National Congress, worded as follows:

“It is indeed a great pleasure for us to know that the African National Congress, South African Indian Congress, South African Congress of Democrats and the South African Coloured Peoples’ Organisation are jointly convening a great assembly of elected representatives of the people of South Africa for the purpose of drawing up a Freedom Charter on 25 and 26 June.

“This united front on the part of the oppressed is really praiseworthy and we are sure this will bring your peaceful struggle for elementary human rights to a successful end very soon.

“You are aware that the people and the Government of India are firmly opposed to the discriminatory policy followed by the South African Government. We believe strongly that this type of thing cannot continue for long in this modern democratic world, and your endeavour is bound to meet with success.

“May God give you patience and mental strength which are most vital things for carrying on a non-violent struggle.

“We extend to you our moral support and wish you all success.”

Mr. Chou En-lai, Prime Minister of the People’s Republic of China, had sent a telegram with the following text:

---

<sup>3</sup> *Indian Opinion*, December 24, 1954, "The African Viewpoint."

“On behalf of the Chinese people, I warmly greet the meeting of the Congress of the People and wish that the Congress will achieve new success in uniting the people of different origins and all sections in South Africa to oppose racial discrimination and to win freedom and democratic rights.

“The Asian-African conference has solemnly condemned colonialism and racial discrimination. The Chinese people, together with the peoples of other Asian and African countries and the people of the whole world, will continue to support the just struggle waged by the people of South Africa.”<sup>4</sup>

294. The following are the most striking passages in the description of the Congress by Manilal Gandhi in the newspaper of which he is the editor:

“Its grand success was beyond all expectations. It would not be amiss to say that never in recent history of South Africa is such a representative meeting of the oppressed people known to have been held. And it was held under the most difficult circumstances imaginable. For what did the Government not do to prevent it? ...

“There were 2,888 delegates from throughout the Union of South Africa present at the meeting despite the fact that about two hundred were prevented by the authorities at Beaufort West in the Cape Province and at Standerton in the Transvaal Province from proceeding to the meeting, under the pretext of not being in possession of permits required under the Immigration Law or passes under the Native Pass Laws ...

“Besides these delegates there had assembled at this meeting over three thousand of the public.

“The police, both European and African, and a squad of men from the Special Branch were present at the meeting from the beginning to the end. Notwithstanding that provocative act, it must be said to the credit of the public that they were not sullen and angry but were happy and gay during the whole session. The weather too had been exceptionally kind ...

“After the preliminary work had been done the draft Freedom Charter was taken clause by clause and speeches were made on it.

“There was justifiable emotion in the speeches made. It was a demonstration of the physical, mental and spiritual torture suffered by a vast majority of the people in this so-called democratic country ...

“Things went on very smoothly until after lunch which was served to all the delegates between 2 and 3 p.m. during which period the whole crowd was entertained with songs and music.

---

<sup>4</sup> Both the above telegrams were published in *Indian Opinion*, July 8, 1955.

“Then, half an hour after the afternoon session commenced, between 3.30 and 4 p.m., all of a sudden it was announced from the platform that armed police were coming towards the platform and that the people should remain calm ...

“Then while the delegates on the platform were being searched the police stood by below with sten guns just ready for orders to shoot. They had a wild look on their faces. Some jeered at the delegates and while the delegates were shouting ‘Africa’ with their thumbs up some of the police were responding with their thumbs down ...

“Once again it was to the credit of the organisers and to the vast assembly that they refused to be intimidated and kept their heads and proceeded with the remaining work ...

“The whole draft Freedom Charter was then passed with acclamation and with the singing of the African National anthem, ‘*Nkosi Sikelele*’ with the representatives of the Government being present on the platform as though to bear witness to it. It was all an act of God ...

“And then the searching of the three thousand delegates began ...

“Every delegate was searched and his name and address was taken and all the papers connected with the proceedings of the meeting were taken away.

“Every European was, in addition, photographed. Searching went on till a little after 8 p.m.

“The ideals set out in the Charter of Freedom cannot be taken exception to by anybody. It is not possible to reach the highest ideal all at once. We can reach it by stages during which it may be necessary to come to some honourable compromise with a Government that is reasonable. There can be no compromise where reason is completely absent and unreasonableness, stark injustice and tyranny are the order of the day.”