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SPECIAL COMMITTEE ON APARTHEID

SUMMARY RECORD OF THE ONE HUNDRED AND FORTY-NINTH MEETING

Held at Headquarters, New York,
on Wednesday, 3 February 1971, at 11.40 a.m.

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Hearing of petitioners

Chairman:

Mr. FARAH

Somalia

Rapporteur:

Mr. BHATT

Nepal

ADOPTION OF THE AGENDA

The agenda was adopted.

HEARING OF PETITIONERS

At the Chairman's invitation, Mr. Houser and Miss Hooper, representatives of the American Committee on Africa, took places at the Committee table.

Mr. HOUSER (American Committee on Africa) observed that, since the Sharpeville massacre, the major aim of State-directed economic development in South Africa had been to achieve self-sufficiency as a means of protection against possible sanctions or foreign reaction against a further internal crisis. With the technological assistance of the United States and other Western countries, that policy had nearly succeeded. Thus, foreign economic assistance was of political, as well as economic, significance to South Africa. In September 1970 the South African Minister for Foreign Affairs had stated that in the ten years since Sharpeville, the international climate had definitely improved for South Africa, a fact which was largely attributable to the country's remarkable economic growth: South Africa ranked among the twelve or fifteen most important international trading nations.

Over the years, the American Committee on Africa, which had the support and assistance of an increasing number of concerned individuals and organizations in the United States, had called for disengagement from South Africa. A new dimension had been added to that campaign in the autumn of 1970, when workers at the Polaroid Corporation in Cambridge, Massachusetts, had publicized their demand that the Corporation should put an end to all its business dealings with South Africa. Part of that business was the supply to the South African military of equipment for producing identity cards and film used in making the passbooks, which were a corner-stone of the apartheid system. In reply, the Polaroid Corporation had stated that it would stop sales of equipment for passbook purposes, although the same equipment would be available for public sale in South Africa. It had sent a committee of four persons, two blacks and two whites, to South Africa to report on the situation. On 13 January 1970, it had taken out full-page advertisements in a large number of newspapers to announce its decision to continue to do business in South Africa.

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(Mr. Houser, American Committee on Africa)

It was estimated that the company, which had an annual volume of business in South Africa of the order of \$1.5 million, had spent at least \$50,000 to launch that propaganda campaign. However, it would be a grave mistake to consider that Polaroid was speaking solely for itself. The company had banking connexions with the Chemical Bank and also with the Morgan Guarantee Trust Company, which was a member of the United States consortium that had extended to the South African Government a \$40 million credit for as long as it was required. In addition, a Polaroid director was also a member of the Board of General Motors. The latter had stated in a press release quoted in the Washington Post of 30 June 1970 that General Motors South African had made a major contribution to the growth and development of the Republic of South Africa. On the other hand, the Episcopal Church had recently called on General Motors, in which it held more than \$1 million worth of shares, to windup its manufacturing operations in South Africa.

Polaroid, in an effort to show that it favoured progressive change, had now announced an experimental programme of assistance to Africans. However, it had admitted, under questioning, that it would operate within the laws of South Africa. The Special Committee was fully aware that African workers in that country had no political rights, their unions were not recognized and strikes were illegal. In connexion with that programme, the Polaroid agent in South Africa, as quoted in the Johannesburg Star of 16 January 1971, had said that he envisaged African employees holding jobs as supervisors of African staff. In that case, the number of opportunities would be very limited, for Polaroid's total black and white staff in South Africa amounted to only 180 people. Polaroid would also pay the educational expenses of 500 black students, but education for blacks in South Africa was both Government-controlled and specifically designed to prevent any change. The philosophy of the Department of Bantu Education was that education should train people according to their opportunities in life, that it should not create false expectations of unlimited opportunity for the "Bantu" in white areas - in other words, it should not encourage them to advance economically and politically. Polaroid's experiment was merely a paternalistic act of charity and the danger was that the programme would be seen as a substitute for the programme being supported by the United Nations, opposition African parties and the people actually waging the struggle against apartheid. In the period

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(Mr. Houser, American Committee on Africa)

1950-1968, United States investment in South Africa had risen from about \$148 million to more than \$800 million, but it had had no influence on apartheid, for many laws enacted since 1967 had made the system even more repressive.

The American Committee on Africa would support the Polaroid workers' call for a boycott of Polaroid products and expose the Corporation's campaign of self-justification. At the same time, it urged the Special Committee to call upon those countries which supported the strategy of disengagement from South Africa to join forces in discouraging foreign corporations from maintaining business relations with the Republic. Such an effort should be centered on certain corporations which were of special importance to South Africa. Lastly, the Special Committee should ascertain whether United Nations agencies were using Polaroid products and call for action to ban the purchase and use of those products.

In answer to a question by Mr. TOMEH (Syria), Mr. NOEL (Secretary of the Committee) said that the cost of circulating Mr. Houser's statement as a document of the Committee would be approximately \$100 per page, including the cost of reproducing and translation.

Mr. TOMEH (Syria), supported by Mr. EDREMODA (Nigeria), Mr. DIABATE (Guinea) and Mr. MUSTAFA (Sudan), proposed that, in view of the importance of Mr. Houser's statement, it should be circulated as a Committee document.

It was so decided.

Mr. OUCIF (Algeria), speaking as the Chairman of the Sub-Committee on Petitions, said that the Polaroid Revolutionary Workers' Movement had submitted a request for a hearing by the Special Committee in connexion with the Polaroid Corporation's trade relations with South Africa. On behalf of the Sub-Committee on Petitions, he recommended that the Special Committee should grant that request.

The CHAIRMAN said that, if he heard no objection, he would take it that the Committee accepted the recommendation of the Sub-Committee.

It was so decided.

At the Chairman's invitation, Mr. Williams and Miss Hunter, representatives of the Polaroid Revolutionary Workers Movement, took places at the Committee table.

Mr. WILLIAMS (Polaroid Revolutionary Workers Movement) said that although the dream of being sole ruler of the world could no longer be realized by one individual alone, it was still possible for a group of men more interested in money and power than in people to achieve that end. With the ID-2 system developed by the Polaroid Corporation - tested and perfected in South Africa - masses of people could easily be controlled by means of identification cards. Dr. Land of the Polaroid Corporation had stated that the use of that photographic equipment could change the daily lives, the living habits of people. Those were dangerous words; they meant that science and technology were being used to achieve power for a few major countries which controlled the economy of the world. The people of the world were being victimized by repressive laws, poverty and war - while the richest country in the world, the United States, spent billions to shoot a rocket to the moon. The world was on the threshold of a struggle between the haves and the have-nots. The people were revolutionary because billions of dollars were being spent on meaningless material things instead of meeting their needs for food, shelter and clothing.

He called upon all nations to boycott the products of the Polaroid Corporation.

Miss HUNTER (Polaroid Revolutionary Workers Movement), reviewing the history of the Polaroid Revolutionary Workers Movement, said that on 5 October 1970 the Polaroid Revolutionary Workers Movement, a group of black workers at the Polaroid Corporation, had initiated a campaign against that Corporation by issuing a leaflet to all Polaroid employees containing general information concerning the Corporation's operations in South Africa. The following day, the Corporation circulated a memorandum stating that Polaroid had not sold its ID-2 system to the South African Government for use in the apartheid programme but that sixty-seven ID-2 machines had been sold to the South African Army and Air Force. The memorandum had also stated that Frank and Hirsch, Ltd., Polaroid's South African distributor, had adopted a policy of equal employment opportunity for blacks.

On 8 October 1970, the Polaroid Revolutionary Workers Movement had presented the Corporation with three demands: that Polaroid should disengage from South Africa, that it should make a public statement in both South Africa and the

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(Miss Hunter, Polaroid Revolutionary
Workers Movement)

United States confirming its position with regard to apartheid and that it should contribute all profits made in South Africa to recognized African liberation movements. On 21 October 1970, the Polaroid Corporation had issued a press release stating that it would discontinue the sale in South Africa of any of its products, including film, used directly or indirectly in South Africa's passbook programmes. On 27 October 1970, the Polaroid Revolutionary Workers Movement, in order to emphasize the urgency of its three demands, had called for a world-wide boycott of all Polaroid products. Meanwhile, Frank and Hirsch, Ltd. had publicly denied that it practised an equal employment opportunity policy, stating that the Government of South Africa would not allow such a policy to exist. On 25 November 1970, the Polaroid Corporation had published an announcement in all the Boston newspapers claiming that it wanted to understand the complexities of the situation in South Africa and planned to form a committee which would go to South Africa and investigate conditions there. During December 1970, Polaroid had in fact sent a group to South Africa composed of two black and two white employees. On 12 January 1971, Polaroid had announced its findings at a closed press conference, and the following day had published an announcement, entitled "An experiment in South Africa", which had appeared in newspapers all over the country. The crux of that announcement was that Polaroid would not withdraw from South Africa since it was in the best interests of the black population of that country for it to remain. Since the Polaroid experiment was an insult to the Polaroid Revolutionary Workers Movement and to everyone striving for the liberation of black South Africa, the Movement would continue to press for an international boycott of all Polaroid products. It called upon the Special Committee to support that boycott and to use its influence to persuade the Polaroid Corporation to abandon its operations in South Africa.

The Polaroid experiment in South Africa was dangerous not only because the ID-2 equipment was a tool of repression and was very useful in maintaining the apartheid system, but also because it gave other American and foreign businesses an opportunity to continue to support the racist régime and at the same time, by providing training for black workers, to provide a solution to South Africa's acute labour shortage.

Mr. TOMEH (Syria) noted that in its announcement of 13 January 1971, the Polaroid Corporation had stated that its sales in South Africa were small, amounting to less than one half of 1 per cent of its world-wide business. He wondered whether the petitioners felt that the fact that Polaroid was operating on such a small scale in South Africa justified its remaining in that country.

Miss HUNTER (Polaroid Revolutionary Workers Movement) replied that the Polaroid Revolutionary Workers Movement found no satisfaction in the fact that Polaroid's South African operations were of limited nature, since it felt that any American or foreign investment in South Africa supported the apartheid system.

Mr. TOMEH (Syria) asked the representatives of the Polaroid Revolutionary Workers Movement whether they felt that the measures to improve the salaries and other benefits of Polaroid's non-white employees referred to in the 13 January announcement would in fact contribute to better conditions for blacks in South Africa.

Mr. WILLIAMS (Polaroid Revolutionary Workers Movement) said that, as far as the Polaroid Revolutionary Workers Movement was concerned, the purpose of the measures suggested by the Polaroid Corporation to improve the conditions of its black workers in South Africa was not to further the cause of self-determination for Africans but rather to enable Polaroid to continue doing business in that country. For instance, the Corporation intended to promote some black workers to supervisory positions over other black workers, which was simply a way of stalling for time.

Mr. TOMEH (Syria) drew the attention of the Committee to an article in the 25 January 1971 issue of Newsweek, in which it was stated that the Polaroid Corporation was the source of film for perhaps 10 per cent of the South African Government's ID pictures, even though the sales were not made directly. He asked the petitioners whether Polaroid had taken any measures to stop such sales.

Mr. WILLIAMS (Polaroid Revolutionary Workers Movement) said that the Polaroid Corporation had taken no action whatsoever to put an end to the sales referred to by the representative of Syria. Furthermore, the figure of \$1.5 million in sales mentioned in the Newsweek article referred only to sales within South Africa and not to exports, which might amount to as much as \$15 million. The figures invoked by the Polaroid Corporation could not hide the fact that it had been doing business in South Africa since 1953 and had made no attempt to help the black people of that country.

Mr. AHMAD (India) said that he would like to know exactly what the ID-2 system was and how it could be used as a tool of dictatorship.

Miss HUNTER (Polaroid Revolutionary Workers Movement) explained that the ID-2 system included a camera, instant processor and laminator and could produce a photo ID card in two minutes and 200 photo ID cards in an hour. While the system served a useful purpose in the United States, it became a dangerous weapon in the hands of a repressive minority dictatorship.

Mr. OUCIF (Algeria) asked the representatives of the Polaroid Revolutionary Workers Movement what action their organization would take if its demands were not met.

Miss HUNTER (Polaroid Revolutionary Workers Movement) replied that the Polaroid Revolutionary Workers Movement had made information regarding Polaroid's South African operations available to the Corporation's largest shareholders, urging them to take financial action against the Corporation if it did not withdraw from South Africa.

Mr. WILLIAMS (Polaroid Revolutionary Workers Movement) said that, in addition to the action mentioned by Miss Hunter, the Polaroid Revolutionary Workers Movement had recently held a large meeting in the Boston area and had called upon people to ask shop owners in their own neighbourhoods not to re-order any Polaroid products. If any shop owners refused to honour the boycott, their shops would be marked with a white cross as a sign of "quarantine". That method had worked before, and he was quite sure it would be effective again. It was the Movement's experience that actions spoke louder than words.

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Mr. ABDULLEH (Somalia) asked whether the Polaroid Corporation merely sold its equipment to South Africa, or also operated it, and whether South Africa could continue to operate the identification equipment provided by the Polaroid Corporation if the Corporation withdrew from the country.

Mr. WILLIAMS (Polaroid Revolutionary Workers' Movement) replied that ID-2 machines could be rented from the General Electric Credit Corporation and it might therefore be possible to duplicate them, but the film used in the System was manufactured solely by the Polaroid Corporation and could not be obtained elsewhere for the time being. Furthermore, it would take several years before the plastic materials and cards used in the System could be duplicated.

Mr. ABDULLEH (Somalia) asked whether it would be possible to invite a representative of the Polaroid Corporation to testify before the Committee.

The CHAIRMAN recalled that the Committee had agreed at its previous meeting that it would find testimony by Polaroid representatives most useful. As a result of the publicity given to the proceedings of that meeting, a representative of the Corporation had come to the United Nations to inquire about the matter, but no subsequent information had been received.

It was important to identify the intentions behind the Corporation's proposals. It had advertised a programme aimed at improving the wages of its African employees and instituting better training programmes but, as the representative of the American Committee on Africa had pointed out, the net result of its proposals was that it would maintain its presence in South Africa. Furthermore, the proposed programme ignored certain relevant legislative enactments of the South African Government which enshrined discrimination as the basis of South Africa's employment policy and were designed to maintain the status quo by statutory means. Those laws included the job reservation laws, which reserved skilled occupations for members of a single racial group. The Government defended job reservation as a positive method of promoting the orderly co-existence of the races. To that end, it had reserved the vast majority of skilled jobs for whites and a few for members of the coloured and Asian communities in order to protect them from alleged unfair competition from the Bantus. Thus, job reservation always worked to the disadvantage of the Africans, although they constituted the vast majority of the South African labour force. For example,

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(The Chairman)

the Native Building Workers Act extended the colour bar to the building industry. It not only prohibited Africans from doing skilled building work in white areas but made provision for a training period for African workers which was a fraction of that provided for white artisans and was limited to bare essentials. The Act itself acknowledged the inadequacy of the training programme for Africans by providing that certificates of competency could be granted to Africans who had acquired the requisite skills by means other than the training courses. Such enforced discrimination in job opportunities and training had achieved exactly what the Government had desired: in the fifteen years since the passage of the Act only 4,200 Africans out of a total labour force of 14 million had qualified as building artisans. They were then paid according to their skills (approximately one third of the wages of their white colleagues).

In examining the feasibility of the proposals made by the Polaroid Corporation, it should also be borne in mind that section 77 of the Industrial Conciliation Act empowered the Minister of Labour to prohibit anyone from doing any job because of his race, as a so-called safeguard against interracial competition. In recommending the application of a colour bar, the Minister could, inter alia, prohibit the replacement of workers of one race by those of another, thus ruling out the possibility that African employees might be upgraded at the expense of white employees, and reserve any class of work or any specific job for members of a particular race. For example, in 1970 the Minister of Bantu Administration had prohibited Africans from holding jobs as typists and telephone operators, among other things. The South African Government had stated on many occasions that no white man would ever take orders from a Bantu.

In the light of those facts, it would be interesting to learn which positions were held, both in the United States and in South Africa, by non-white workers in the Polaroid Corporation and which positions would be open to such workers in South Africa if the Corporation's new employment policy was put into effect. Its proposals must be viewed within the context of South African legislation and of the conditions created by that legislation; for example, the Bantu Act restricted the kind of education a Bantu could receive.

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(The Chairman)

He expressed the hope that a representative of the Polaroid Corporation would be in a position to testify before the Committee, since its policy could have repercussions far greater than might be believed from a first reading of its cleverly-worded but perhaps somewhat misleading advertisement.

He thanked the petitioners for the information they had given the Committee and the forms of action against apartheid which they had suggested. Their co-operation was representative of the kind of support which the Committee expected from the public.

Mr. TOMEH (Syria) expressed his delegation's appreciation to the representatives of the Polaroid Revolutionary Workers Movement for the valuable information they had given the Committee. Referring to operative paragraph 5 of General Assembly resolution 2506 B (XXIV), he observed that the Polaroid Corporation had itself admitted that it was conducting business in South Africa and asked what action the Committee proposed to take at the Governmental level.

The CHAIRMAN replied that it was the custom in such cases for the Chairman of the Committee to submit a communication to the delegation of the country concerned expressing concern that a company of its nationality was involved, economically or otherwise, in South Africa in violation of General Assembly resolutions. He felt, however, that such action would be inopportune at the present stage.

Mr. OUCIF (Algeria) proposed that, in view of its importance, the official statement of the Polaroid Revolutionary Workers Movement should be circulated in extenso as a Committee document.

Mr. NOEL (Secretary of the Committee) said that the cost of reproducing and translating the statement would be approximately \$100 per page.

The CHAIRMAN said that if there were no objections, he would take it that the Committee agreed that the official statement of the Polaroid Revolutionary Workers' Movement should be circulated in extenso.

It was so decided.

The meeting rose at 1.40 p.m.