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AD HOC COMMITTEE ON SLAVERY

First Session

SUMMARY RECORD OF THE FIFTEENTH MEETING

Held at Lake Success, New York,
on Tuesday, 28 February 1950, at 11 a.m.

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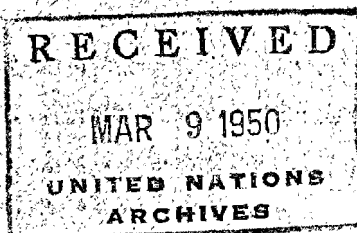
Chairman: Mr. POBLETE TRONCOSO (Chile)
Members: Mr. GREENIDGE (United Kingdom of Great Britain
and Northern Ireland)
Mr. LASKER (United States of America)
Mrs. VIALLE (France)

Representatives of non-governmental organizations:

Mr. HERLING International League for the
Rights of Man
Mr. DIALLO World Federation of Trade Unions

Secretariat:

Mr. LAWSON Secretary of the Committee



SUGGESTIONS AS TO AN APPROPRIATE DIVISION OF RESPONSIBILITY AMONG THE VARIOUS BODIES WITHIN THE FRAMEWORK OF THE UNITED NATIONS (continued):
HEARING OF REPRESENTATIVES OF NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS

1. The CHAIRMAN recalled that the Committee had decided to hear the representatives of non-governmental organizations willing to supply information or submit suggestions regarding the survey of the field of slavery. He stressed the technical nature of the Committee and pointed out that the experts of whom it was composed did not in any way represent their respective Governments and were solely motivated by a desire to eradicate slavery and customs and institutions resembling it. He therefore asked the representatives of organizations which had responded to the Committee's appeal to exclude political considerations from their statements and to bear in mind that the Committee's basic aim was the application of the principles set forth in Article 4 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights: "No one shall be held in slavery or servitude; slavery and the slave trade shall be prohibited in all their forms".

2. Mr. HERLING (International League for the Rights of Man) submitted to the Committee a number of documents containing information on peonage in Latin American countries, in particular a series of reports submitted to the Commission of Inquiry into Forced Labour.

3. He emphasized that the information in his possession was limited in scope and mainly related to Bolivia, Peru and Ecuador.

4. In Ecuador, according to the evidence of Mr. Buitron, many of the Indians who formed the majority of the population in the highland region, did not possess their own land and were obliged to work as peons in the haciendas. The peon received no wages and could not leave his patron's employ without permission. Usually, however, he had no desire to leave the hacienda and was passively resigned to his fate. His children were employed as shepherds and could not attend school. Like the Bolivian huasipunguero, the peon was often in debt and when he died his debt was passed down to his widow and children. In that respect peonage in Latin America differed from the form of peonage to be found in certain parts of the United States, where the debt lapsed with the death of the peon. In Latin American countries equal wages were not paid for

equal work, wages varying according to age, sex or religion. Workers under sixteen or over fifty years of age and women were not paid at the same rate as adult male workers.

5. In the region of the Andes, Indians were required to work not only for the civil and religious authorities but also for all non-Indians.

6. From the report on conditions of life and work of indigenous populations of Latin American countries submitted to the fourth conference of American States Members of the International Labour Organisation held at Montevideo in April 1949 it appeared that, in some urban centres, Indians coming to market were forced by the local police to do certain work. In some places attempts had been made to obtain such services by persuasion and by playing on the Indian's respect for the mingo or ayni, i.e. the principle of voluntary mutual aid. As distinct from the forms of compulsory service at one time prevalent in Europe, peonage in Latin America was confined to a single section of the population regarded as inferior.

7. According to a Worldover Press release of 3 December 1948, conditions of work in the yerba mate plantations of Paraguay also left much to be desired. The British and Argentinian syndicates which owned the plantations still applied the old system of forced labour. Workers were paid a mere pittance and had to buy everything they needed in the company's stores. The company's police guarded the roads and brought back any labourers who tried to escape. The correspondent of the Worldover Press had vouched for the accuracy of those facts, of which he had received confirmation from a reliable source.

8. The CHAIRMAN asked Mr. Herling what methods the League he represented was proposing to employ to combat the customs and institutions he had denounced.

9. Mr. HERLING (International League for the Rights of Man) thought that the education of the peoples of countries where slavery and customs resembling it continued to exist was the first and most important method of eliminating the evil. Efforts in that field would be strengthened if Governments subsequently pledged themselves by international agreement to take the necessary steps to secure the final elimination of slavery from their territories. He emphasized however that it was above all necessary to appeal to the goodwill of the peoples if the complete suppression of slavery was to be accomplished.

10. Mrs. VIALLE asked whether the inquiries of the International League for the Rights of Man had been confined to Latin American countries.
11. Mr. HERLING (International League for the Rights of Man) replied that the International League had also carried out inquiries into labour conditions in the USSR and certain countries of the East. He did not, however, feel it necessary to give details of those inquiries, since the Economic and Social Council had already considered the question and the contents of the documents prepared by the League were therefore already familiar to the Committee.
12. The International League would gladly provide the Committee with documents on labour conditions in Non-Self-Governing and Trust Territories in South Africa. As regards Ethiopia, Mr. Herling drew attention to assertions made in some quarters that slavery had ceased to exist in that country since the proclamation of independence by Haile Selassie. If that were true, it would be the first historical instance of the total elimination of slavery as a result of a simple declaration. Mr. Herling was inclined to agree with Mr. Greenidge that, although slavery in a legal sense might have disappeared in Ethiopia, it was unlikely that the 800,000 slaves who had existed there in 1930 had since obtained their freedom.
13. The CHAIRMAN said that much of the information in the report on peonage in Latin American countries to which Mr. Herling had referred was rather out of date. Most of the constitutions of which it spoke had since been superseded.
14. Mr. LASKER thanked the representative of the International League for the Rights of Man for his detailed and constructive statement. On the question of peonage, he said that in his opinion the idea of debt was inherent in that of peonage, whereas Mr. Herling's statement appeared to indicate that it was of comparatively recent origin. He asked whether the representative of the League for the Rights of Man could clarify his views on that point.
15. Mr. HERLING (International League for the Rights of Man) explained that the word "peon" was not used in the same sense in all Latin American /countries.

countries. Though the idea of forced labour had its origin in the Aztec civilization, the position of the workers of that period could not be compared with that of the present-day Indians. The primitive communism of the Aztec period had been replaced by the feudal regime of the Spanish conquerors. The Spanish in South America had done much the same as the white colonizers in South Africa; forced labour of the same type had continued to be enforced on the workers but its duration had been considerably prolonged.

16. Mr. GREENIDGE thanked Mr. Herling for his statement and for the valuable documents he had placed at the Committee's disposal. He inquired whether the representative of the International League for the Rights of Man had any information on forms of slavery in Yemen, Cyprus, the Spanish and French colonies in Africa, and Madagascar. He thought that Mr. Herling might be able to answer his question at a later date.

17. Mr. HERLING (International League for the Rights of Man) said he could submit some of the information requested by Mr. Greenidge together with the information requested by Mr. Lasker at a later date.

18. The International League for the Rights of Man did not however have any information on Yemen or Cyprus. A report had quite recently been received on Madagascar, which he had not yet had time to study in detail. He was reluctant to use it without verifying the facts or situations to which it referred, since, in his opinion, no conclusions should be reached on questions of that kind until the information on which they were based had been proved trustworthy.

19. He had information from a reliable source on the Portuguese colony of Angola, but circumstances forbade him to disclose the names of the persons from whom it had been received. Some aspects of the situation prevailing in that territory had, however, made a strong impression on him and he was prepared to submit the information he possessed to the Committee. Although that information was entirely objective, its nature was such that it might be misinterpreted or lead to false or tendentious conclusions unless it was used with caution.

20. The League had no information on the Spanish colonies in Africa. It should be borne in mind that the International League's Commission of Inquiry into Forced Labour was embarking on surveys which would relate to the world as a whole.

21. The CHAIRMAN, on behalf of all members of the Committee, thanked Mr. Herling for his interesting statement and for the many documents he had placed at the Committee's disposal. He invited the Committee to hear a statement from Mr. Diallo, representative of the World Federation of Trade Unions, and reminded the latter to avoid any reference to the political aspects of the problem and to confine himself exclusively to questions within the Committee's competence.

22. Mr. DIALLO (World Federation of Trade Unions) said that his organization was deeply interested in the problem of slavery. The Committee had been wise not to waste time on trying to define the term "slavery"; the definition embodied in the 1926 Convention could be effectively used as a basis. He hoped that the Committee would not suffer the same setbacks as the various bodies of the League of Nations which had dealt with the question in the past. Resolution 238 (IX) of the Economic and Social Council instructed the Committee in particular "to survey the field of slavery and other institutions or customs resembling slavery, and to assess the nature and extent of those several problems at the present time." The Committee should make a special point of fulfilling the second of those tasks; he feared that the questionnaire to be sent to Governments which the Committee had drawn up was not the most effective method. The Committee should institute enquiries without delay in collaboration with trade unions and other democratic organizations. Strictly official sources did not always yield the most valuable information; unofficial information should be sought in order to ascertain the true state of affairs. The Committee might also have considered carrying out on-the-spot surveys, especially in colonial and Non-Self-Governing territories which would add weight to its conclusions.

23. In the light of those considerations, the World Federation of Trade Unions had decided to submit to the Committee the following suggestions:
(1) The questionnaire prepared by the Committee should be circulated to leading international trade unions, and in particular to the World Federation of Trade Unions. Mr. Diallo remarked in that connexion that when organizations protested against certain acts or situations, attempts were often made to evade the issue by suggesting that their actions were motivated by purely political considerations. Thus, when certain trade unions had demanded higher wages or better

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working conditions, it had been alleged that their action had been inspired by the Communists and was based on political motives only; yet many of the members of the trade unions in question were pious, God-fearing people. The Committee should take that fact into account and try to collect information from various sources.

(2) On-the-spot surveys in collaboration with trade union organizations should be instituted. It would be useful at the same time to study the economic and social structure and the feudal origins of slavery and related practices, as well as the reasons for their survival.

(3) A study should be made of the influence of large private interests, which were at the root of the evil, and the considerable profits resulting from the exploitation of labour, as well as their repercussions upon the labour market. The question on that aspect of the problem included in the Questionnaire should have been more clearly and effectively worded.

24. He agreed with Mr. Herling that the information obtained should be circulated and that educational progress should be encouraged.

25. Referring to an earlier remark by the Chairman, he said that it was very difficult to dissociate the technical aspect of the problem of slavery from the political. Non-recognition of the right of association or persecution of existing trade unions might lead to slavery and similar practices; on the other hand, if those organizations could condemn them, such practices would hardly be able to survive.

26. The CHAIRMAN pointed out that the Committee had considered the possibility of on-the-spot surveys. That question could not, however, be resolved until the end of the Committee's second session. The Committee had therefore begun by making arrangements for inquiries among official bodies, but such inquiries would not, of course, be its only source of information.

27. He thanked Mr. Diallo for his remarks and asked whether he could submit a written statement.

28. Mr. DIALLO (World Federation of Trade Unions) replied that he would gladly prepare a written statement containing the text of his remarks and the WFTU's proposals, and explaining that his organization would collaborate with the Committee if the latter accepted its proposals.

29. Mr. LASKER stressed that it was not the Committee's intention to limit itself strictly to the purely technical aspects of the problem of slavery. It would be very useful for the Committee to receive information from trade union organizations on the effects of slavery on the labour market and the freedom of workers. Trade unions should communicate information on questions of which they had made a particular study or which were of immediate interest to them. It might not even be necessary for those organizations to undertake special studies, since their archives probably already contained information of interest to the Committee.

30. Mr. GREENIDGE said, in reply to a criticism from Mr. Diallo, that the Committee did not propose to obtain information from Governments alone; it had also approached non-governmental organizations and private experts. It would be unfair if the Committee were to seek information from unofficial sources only, overlooking governmental sources. Mr. Diallo had likewise suggested that a survey should be carried out in territories dependent upon other States; he had not, however, spoken of such a survey of autonomous territories, while the Committee had, in fact, considered making inquiries in territories in the latter category.

31. Mr. Greenidge added that the Committee would welcome information from the World Federation of Trade Unions and any organization connected with it, and suggested that Mr. Diallo should give the Committee the addresses of persons or organizations upon whom it might call.

The meeting rose at 12.30 p.m.