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SPECIAL COMMITTEE AGAINST APARTHEID

SUMMARY RECORD OF THE 566th MEETING

Held at Headquarters, New York,  
on Monday, 13 May 1985, at 10.30 a.m.

Chairman: Mr. GARBA (Nigeria)

CONTENTS

Adoption of the agenda

Opening remarks by the Chairman

Message from the Secretary-General

Statement by the Chairman in honour of Mr. Stevie Wonder

Statement by Mr. Stevie Wonder

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The meeting was called to order at 11.50 a.m.

ADOPTION OF THE AGENDA

1. The agenda was adopted.

OPENING REMARKS BY THE CHAIRMAN

2. The CHAIRMAN said that the 566th meeting of the Special Committee against Apartheid was devoted to honouring Mr. Stevie Wonder, an internationally acclaimed personality in the field of entertainment.
3. At the invitation of the Chairman, Mr. Stevie Wonder took a place at the Committee table.

MESSAGE FROM THE SECRETARY-GENERAL

4. Mr. AKHUND (Assistant Secretary-General, Centre against Apartheid), reading out a message from the Secretary-General, said that Mr. Wonder's songs had brought happiness to millions throughout the world. Mr. Wonder was also an artist with a social conscience and a strong humanitarian vocation; he was one of the prominent personalities who had decided to put their artistic talents at the service of the United Nations project for Africa; he had also expressed his solidarity with the struggle against apartheid by dedicating his Academy Award to Nelson Mandela, the leader of the South African national resistance. It was therefore with great pleasure that the Secretary-General welcomed Mr. Wonder to United Nations Headquarters.

STATEMENT BY THE CHAIRMAN IN HONOUR OF MR. STEVIE WONDER

5. The CHAIRMAN said that the Special Committee had specifically chosen Mr. Wonder's thirty-fifth birthday as the date of its special meeting to honour him for his many accomplishments and to pay tribute to his humanism, selflessness and courage. Mr. Wonder had been born blind and had attended a multiracial school for blind children, where he had first come to realize that the colour of a person's skin determined his position in life. After having been in a coma caused by an automobile accident in 1973, he had come to believe that, in his own words, "I am here to do something for God, to make it possible for people to communicate with each other better".
6. Mr. Wonder had accepted an Academy Award for the best original song in the name of Nelson Mandela, who after 21 years remained in prison because he had demanded justice for his people. While Mr. Wonder's declaration had caused his songs to be banned by the South African régime, the world had taken it as a pledge that men of music and the arts would not remain uncommitted while men like Nelson Mandela gave their all so that justice might prevail and that racial hatred might be eliminated from the earth. Not content with gestures of symbolic support, Mr. Wonder had refused a substantial sum of money to perform in South Africa.

(The Chairman)

7. It should be noted that many other well-known performers had also rejected financial and other blandishments offered by the racist régime in an attempt to break the cultural boycott of South Africa; at the same time, however, a large number of performers continued to accept engagements in that country, either because they were unaware of the consequences of their action or because they erroneously believed that by performing before racially mixed audiences in South Africa they were helping to combat racial discrimination. Unfortunately, there were other performers who accepted such engagements for less praiseworthy reasons.

8. It had recently been claimed that the boycott introduced politics into the fields of culture and sports, and that it interfered with artistic freedom and integrity. Because such assertions were so far from the truth, he wished to explain the background and purpose of the cultural boycott and the action which the Special Committee was taking to implement it.

9. The cultural boycott of South Africa had been initiated by the artistic community in reaction to stringent regulations issued by the racist régime in 1965 with a view to prohibiting multiracial performances and audiences. The United Nations General Assembly had subsequently requested all States and organizations to suspend cultural, educational, sports and other exchanges with that régime. Musicians' and actors' unions had sought to persuade their members not to perform in South Africa, and many playwrights had refused to allow their plays to be staged there. A number of Governments had ceased to engage in cultural exchanges with South Africa. Over the years, many artists' organizations and individual performers had worked to strengthen the boycott. A number of South African musicians, writers and artists had participated in a festival and symposium entitled "Cultural and Resistance", held in Botswana in 1982; he also mentioned several performers in the United States who had rejected tempting offers to perform in South Africa.

10. In 1983, in pursuance of a General Assembly decision to strengthen the cultural boycott, the Special Committee had begun to publish a register of entertainers, actors and others who had performed in apartheid South Africa. The register did not, however, constitute a blacklist aimed at penalizing individuals for their views. The register was not concerned with the political opinions of the persons whose names appeared on it and suggested no punitive action against them. It merely recorded the fact that an artist had visited South Africa, thereby putting his or her talents at the service of the racist régime in contravention of a cultural boycott imposed by the United Nations. The register also served to inform performers who might have gone to South Africa unwittingly of the existence of the cultural boycott. In fact, a number of performers who had learned of the boycott through the register had written to the Special Committee affirming their abhorrence of apartheid and pledging not to return to South Africa as long as that system prevailed. It should be noted that the huge fees which South Africa used to lure entertainers into performing there were an indication of the régime's anxiety to break the boycott.

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(The Chairman)

11. In recent years the South African authorities had begun to relax the segregation of cultural events and audiences decreed in 1965, and had tried to make a showcase of places like Sun City in the bantustan of Bophuthatswana. However, such efforts were merely intended to delude world opinion. In the words of one British pop singer who had returned from South Africa in 1982, "Sun City is an Afrikaner's paradise in a black man's nightmare". Despite much current talk of reform in South Africa, change would occur only when the régime began to dismantle the structures of apartheid. The almost daily reports of massacres, arrests and imprisonments were a reflection of the true situation. Nearly 300 persons had lost their lives at the hands of the police and military in the past six months in South Africa, many of them killed while peacefully en route to the funerals of persons killed during demonstrations. Even as the Botha Government talked of dialogue, it was arresting all the leaders of African public opinion with whom such dialogue ought to be held. He therefore called on all present to intensify their efforts to put pressure on the South African régime to compel it to change its policies while there was still time.

12. Mr. Wonder, like Homer, had been deprived of the faculty of sight, but, like Homer, had been given the gift of a bright vision of a world without injustice, a world of equality and harmony among peoples. In pursuit of that vision, Mr. Wonder had made a moral commitment to the fight against apartheid. On behalf of the Special Committee, he wished to offer Mr. Wonder a citation in recognition of that commitment and of his work to uplift the downtrodden people of the world.

13. The Chairman presented Mr. Stevie Wonder with a citation from the Special Committee against Apartheid and a letter from Mr. Edward Koch, Mayor of the City of New York.

STATEMENT BY MR. STEVIE WONDER

14. Mr. WONDER said that, on the occasion of his birthday, he wished to introduce those present to a very special and spirited friend of his named Light. Over the years, when he had lost his way, Light had found him; when issues had become clouded in his mind, Light had illuminated them. Light was his very dear friend, helping him to understand opinions that were not his own, counselling him to trust that which he knew in his heart was right, and showing him the truth.

15. Light had been to South Africa and had painted pictures of that country which had crossed the barriers of his blindness. However, his efforts to understand the situation in that country had caused him to ask a great number of questions. He had been told that those in power in South Africa believed that they had a covenant with a God that allowed them to take care of the majority of the population. Yet if that were so, he wondered why such glaring discrepancies existed between the opportunities offered to blacks and to whites for education, health care, employment and land. Light had told him that all people were created equal and should have equal access to all such opportunities.

(Mr. Wonder)

16. If workers were required to live near the industrial centres in South Africa, he wondered why it was necessary to separate them from their wives and children. Light had told him that families should not be separated for the sake of the convenience of an economic system. He wondered why so many had protested and given their lives to avoid having to live in resettlement camps. Light had told him that the resettlement policy was wrong; if the camps were so wonderful, why did white South Africans not wish to live there?

17. He wondered, too, about the prisoners of conscience held by the South African authorities, and asked what kind of system could survive only by the violent power of those in charge.

18. When he thought about South Africa, he seemed to hear a familiar, melancholy chord. Perhaps that chord recalled the pain of joblessness which existed in his own country, the lack of communication between parents and children, the cry of the homeless and the wail of the hungry. He was asking whether such things were right, not on behalf of those who had the Creator in their hearts, but for those who were blinded by ego and by evil, who had convinced themselves that wrong was right and who had tried to rewrite the universal laws which governed mankind. Such things had never been and would never be right. Light had frequently inspired him to say things which were unpopular; nevertheless, if such things were right, they could not be overpowered by might.

19. The world could not continue to overlook the blemish of apartheid. When people were hungry, they sought food; when they were jobless, they fought to find a way to live; when their human rights were denied and they were oppressed, they rose up and freed themselves as they listened to the bell of freedom ringing. In honour of the occasion, he had written a song about the bell of freedom which he wished to perform for those present.

20. Mr. Wonder, accompanying himself on the piano, sang a song which he had composed for the special meeting of the Special Committee against Apartheid.

The meeting rose at 12.40 p.m.