

Asian and African Countries Call for an End to Colonialism

When World War II ended in 1945, much of Asia and most of Africa were under the rule of European imperialist powers. (The Philippines was under the rule of the United States.) Then began a process known as decolonization. The Philippines became independent in 1946, India and Pakistan in 1947. Other nations soon did also—Burma (now Myanmar), Ceylon (now Sri Lanka), Indonesia, and more.

In 1955, these newly independent nations—along with such nations as Thailand and China, which had not been colonies—held a conference at Bandung, Indonesia, to talk about common interests and concerns. Indonesia's President Sukarno referred to the gathering as "the first international conference of colored peoples in the history of mankind." Twenty-nine countries, representing more than half the world's population, sent delegates. Major leaders who attended included Sukarno, Premier Zhou En-lai of China, and Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru of India.

Since the Bandung Conference occurred at the height of the cold war, it caused quite a stir. U.S. leaders viewed the gathering with deep misgivings—and so did the leaders of the Soviet Union. Many delegates to the conference were strongly opposed to communism. They considered the Soviet Union's domination of Eastern Europe and central Asia to be an example of colonialism. In the end, the conference condemned "colonialism in all its manifestations [forms]."

The documents that follow touch on the theme of anti-colonialism. The first is from Sukarno's speech to the conference's opening session. The second is excerpted from the conference's closing statement. The third is a Western observer's understanding of the conference.

A. Sukarno's Speech

All of us, I am certain, are united by more important things than those which superficially divide us. We are united, for instance, by a common detestation of colonialism in whatever form it appears. We are united by a common detestation of [racism]. And we are united by a common determination to preserve and stabilize peace in the world...

We are often told, "Colonialism is dead." Let us not be deceived or even soothed by that. I say to you, colonialism is not yet dead. How can we say it is dead, so long as vast areas of Asia and Africa are unfree?

And, I beg of you, do not think of colonialism only in the classic form which we of Indonesia, and our brothers in different parts of Asia and Africa, knew. Colonialism has also its modern dress, in the form of economic control, intellectual control, actual physical control by a small but alien community within a nation. It is a skillful and determined enemy, and it appears in many guises. It does not give up its loot easily. Wherever, whenever and however it appears, colonialism is an evil thing, and one which must be eradicated from the earth....

B. Closing Statement

The Asian-African Conference discussed the problems of dependent peoples and colonialism and the evils arising from subjection of peoples to alien...domination and exploitation. The Conference agreed:

First, in declaring that colonialism in all its [forms] is an evil which should speedily be brought to an end;

Second, in affirming that the subjection of peoples to alien...domination and exploitation constitutes a denial of fundamental human rights, is contrary to the Charter of the United Nations, and is [a bar] to the promotion of world peace and cooperation;

Third, in declaring its support of the cause of freedom and independence for all such peoples; and

Fourth, in calling upon the powers concerned to grant freedom and independence to such peoples.

One of those who attended the Bandung Conference as a journalist and observer was Richard Wright, the African American novelist, author of Black Boy and other well-known works. Wright attended the conference hoping to gain a new understanding of the political stirrings in Asia and Africa and the changing nature of world politics. The following excerpt is from his 1956 book The Color Curtain: A report on the Bandung Conference

C. Richard Wright on the Conference

The results of the [discussion] of the delegates at Bandung would be, of course, addressed to the people and the statesmen of the Western powers, for it was the moral notions—or lack of them—of those powers that were in question here; it had been against the dominance of those powers that these delegates and their populations had struggled so long. After two days of torrid public speaking and four days of discussions in closed sessions, the Asian-African Conference issued a [statement]. It was a sober document, brief and to the point, yet it did not hesitate to lash out, in terse legal prose, at racial injustice and colonial exploitation.

I repeat and underline that the document was addressed to the West, in my opinion, must be big enough, generous enough, to accept and understand that bitterness. The Bandung communiqué was no appeal, in terms of sentiment or ideology, to Communism. Instead, it carried exalted overtones of the stern dignity of ancient and proud peoples who yearned to rise and play again a role in human affairs.

Review Questions

A. Sukarno

1. Why did Sukarno refer to both colonialism and racism in his opening statements?
2. What were the common bonds that united all the delegates to the conference?
3. What group did Sukarno mean when he spoke of “a small but alien community with a nation

B. Closing Statement

- 1 a.. How did the closing statement of the conference use Sukarno’s opening statements?
 - b. Why did the delegates refer to the charter of the United Nations?
2. How might the delegates have used the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights to support their arguments against colonialism?

C. Richard Wright

1. Why did Richard Wright feel that the closing statement of the conference was directed toward Western Nations?
2. Do you think Wright’s interpretation was correct?