

Seminar report written by Prof. Jónína Einarsdóttir, University of Iceland and Proscovia Svärd, The Nordic Africa Institute

The Nordic Documentation Project on the Liberation Struggles in Southern Africa: The Icelandic People's involvement and Lessons Learnt

The Nordic Africa Institute, in collaboration with the Icelandic NGO Afríka 20:20 and the Anthropological Institute at Iceland University, organised a seminar on *The Nordic Documentation Project on the Liberation Struggles in Southern Africa: The Icelandic People's involvement and Lessons Learnt* at The Nordic House, Sturlugata 5, Reykjavík, Saturday 21 February 2009 at 10:00 a.m. – 12:30 p.m.

The aim of the seminar was to disseminate the work of the Nordic Documentation Project (see: www.liberationafrica.se), bring together former and current activists and academics, to revisit the history of the struggles. What lessons could be drawn from the anti-apartheid struggles and what do these struggles mean for international solidarity today?

The seminar began with a welcome note by Ms. Jóhanna Eyjólfsdóttir, Director of Amnesty International Iceland Section, who was the chairperson.

She was followed by Ms. Proscovia Svärd, Co-ordinator of the Nordic Documentation Project. Ms. Svärd presented the work that the project has so far done and also talked about the purpose of her visit to Iceland, which was to identify former activists and to localise archival materials relevant to the liberation struggles. The Project strives to have a complete Nordic profile and therefore would like to include Iceland in its work. Ms. Svärd visited Iceland last year and localised a few documents and interviewed some of the former activists. Iceland has not been part of this project mainly because it was not included in the original research project from which the idea of conducting a Nordic Documentation project emanated. This research project entitled *National Liberation in Southern Africa: The role of the Nordic Countries* was conducted at the Nordic Africa Institute in 1994 – 2001 by Mr. Tor Sellström and resulted into 5 volumes which documented the official involvement of Norway, Denmark, Finland and Sweden in the liberation struggles. Iceland was not included in its terms of reference of the project but its official role is mentioned in the Swedish publications. These publications were displayed during the seminar. Based on the seminar deliberations, interest to write the Icelandic version of the struggles was expressed. She informed the audience that Iceland is now part of the Project and that a website has been constructed, where the first set of interviews have been published. She talked about the different sub-projects that the Nordic Documentation Project has financially supported in Angola, Namibia and Tanzania and which have strengthened the archival institutions that have endeavoured to document the history of the struggles. She said that through documentation, memories of the past are captured and the truth is exposed. She reiterated that the desire to know the truth is always important and it is supported by documentation. The truth also applies to the current Icelandic crisis because the Icelandic people would like to know what exactly put them in crisis they are in today. Therefore, documentation should be used to enhance the people's struggles in order to enhance post-liberation struggles, human rights, accountability, reconciliation democracy and development.

Ms. Svärd's presentation was followed by Mr. Gestur Svavarson, who is a former activist. His presentation focused on *Fighting Apartheid in South Africa: The Icelandic People's Involvement*. He gave a comprehensive and a personal view of the activities that were organized throughout the years on Iceland to fight against apartheid. Mr. Svavarson illustrated how he as a teenager joined The South Africa Committee Against Apartheid (Suðurafríkusamtökin gegn apartheid), an experience that has influenced his later life and contributed to his present engagement in human rights. The South Africa Committee against Apartheid (Suðurafríkusamtökin gegn apartheid) was established in 1988. In the years 1989 and 1990, Mr. Svavarson together with a group of Icelandic youth sang "Unzima lomthwalo ufuna madoda, Unzima lomthwalo ufuna madoda, Azikatali nomasja bushua sizi misele nkululeko, Azikatali nomasja bushua sizi misele nkululeko" in central Reykjavík to collect money for humanitarian aims. Why was the same song heard in the capital of an island in the North Atlantic Ocean as in Soweto in the year 1976? Svavarson explained how he and other members became inspired by the leader of The South Africa Committee Against Apartheid, Ms. Sigþrúður Gunnarsdóttir, who had been engaged with the international anti-apartheid movement in London. Mr. Svavarson together with other high school students, 16-18 years old, also entered shops and ripped off labels to expose South African goods and to make consumers to avoid buying them.

Earlier, in the year 1985 the Apprentices' Union of Iceland (Iðnnemasamband Íslands) under the leadership of Kristinn Halldór Einarsson decided to actualise *Nordisk Operasjon Dagsverk* in Iceland, however, the Minister of Education refused to give the students a day off for that work. Therefore, a concert was instead organised in April 1985 based on a model that differentiated people between black and white, and reminded them of the segregation in South Africa. Despite much effort, few people attended this concert and the apartheid struggle did not get much media attention. On the 17th of July, 1989, another concert which was this time quite big, was organised and it became a great success. At the grassroots, the fight against Apartheid continued and Mr. Svavarson ended his lecture by stressing that the activities that were organised, small and big, all contributed to increased knowledge about the cruel and inhuman nature of apartheid and finally its fall in South Africa. However, he emphasized that the struggle for human rights continues.

After the coffee break, Ms. Kristín Loftsdóttir, Professor in Anthropology, University of Iceland, made a presentation on *(In)human Faces in Global and Localized Apartheid*. She pointed out that recently, Israel has been identified as an apartheid state. This identification has however been criticized, as some see it as degrading to the actual apartheid in South Africa, others as offensive to Israel as a democratic state. Ms. Loftsdóttir highlighted certain similarities between the state policies of Israel and apartheid in South Africa following Daril J. Glaser's claim that comparing these two systems do not necessarily imply that they are the same, but that there are certain similarities. The similarities become obvious when Israel and the occupied areas are treated as a part of the same political unit. Ms. Loftsdóttir stressed, that the term apartheid can be useful to identify how racism adapts and changes to new circumstances, reflecting even racism as firmly embedded within ideas of modernity and purity. Even though ideas of human classification into different coloured groups can be seen as prior to the 19th century, racism appeared in the middle of 19th century as a scientific and sanctioned way of classifying and explaining diversity. Ideas of

race have always been embedded in ideas of culture, and the strong emphasis on culture of certain groups, as a marker of their inferiority is often referred to as the neo or new racism, characterizing the contemporary world. Racism, as Zygmund Bauman has stressed, is in fact reflected in how certain groups of people are put aside, because they are seen as underdeveloped, uncivilized and incapable of being a part of modernity. Ms. Loftsdóttir argues that Bauman's attention to how modern technologies of power are a part of racism, offers a perspective that can both be used to analyze apartheid in South Africa and the Palestinian situation. She concluded by criticizing the dehumanizing past and present discourses that attempt to justify the crude human rights violations by referring to state security, and stressing the powerlessness in both those who perpetrate and those who are victims of violence.

Ms. Magnfríður Júlíusdóttir who is an Assistant Professor in Geography, University of Iceland focused on *Apartheid - Keeping People in Place*. She maintained that similarities may be found between South-Africa, where apartheid was a legally formalized segregation of people based on race categorization, and Palestine today. Segregation can be conceptualized as the exclusion of groups from access to resources and opportunities other groups in a city or society enjoy. In practice the excluded group is usually concentrated in space, that is spatial segregation and socioeconomic inequality goes hand in hand. In cases where the spatial segregation is not formally enforced, it still actively reproduces inequality, which is not so visible to the privileged group as the 'others' in the excluded group are kept in their place and out of sight. In both Palestinian and Southern African colonial context, land acquisition by the privileged group led to impoverishment of people excluded from their formerly best agricultural land. Similarities are found in the privileged groups discourses on just taking 'empty land' and need for 'pure areas'. In the struggle to get back their land and freedom of movement the Palestinians borrow central concepts from the South African regime, like apartheid and Bantustan. The infamous wall the Israelis are building to cement the segregation is named the 'Apartheid wall' and 'Bantustan maps' of the West Bank show islands of Palestine land cut off from each other by Israeli claimed territory. Finally Ms. Júlíusdóttir pointed out that in a western urban context Los Angeles, USA, is claimed to be the most extreme case of processes of urban ethnic segregation, manifested in the privileged Anglo-group segregating itself in gated communities. The now majority group of immigrants from Latin America and Asia live in the center of the city. She points out how Mike Davis (1990) talks of this process as "Fortress LA". The militarization of public space as both planning and police is used to keep the excluded group 'in place'. Davis also makes links to the idea of the Bantustans as a labour reserve for the white South Africa, when he talks about a 'Latino Bantustan armies', when referring to the cheap labour the new immigrants provide.

Mr. Sveinn Rúnar Hauksson, MD and Chairman Association Iceland-Palestine, outlined further the similarities between apartheid as practiced formerly in South Africa and in present day Palestine in his presentation entitled *Apartheid in Israel and Occupied Palestine*. Mr. Hauksson, who has followed the situation in Palestine for decades, illustrated vividly, with pictures and narratives, the conditions under which the Palestinian population lives. Finally, he paid attention to the importance to learn from prior successful struggles.

The seminar ended with general discussion on lessons learnt and a few closing remarks by Ms. Jónína Einarsdóttir, Professor Anthropology, University of Iceland, and Chairman for the Association Afrika 20:20.