

The Greater Evil

Extract from the Provisional Summary Record of Speech by Judge Abu Rannat at the UN Sub-Commission on the Prevention of Discrimination and the Protection of Minorities - Twenty-fifth Session.

WHILE chattel slavery had been prevalent and tacitly accepted as recently as 1966 throughout the Sahara, it was now almost at an end. Though some traffic continued illicitly, Governments had been enforcing their laws. Unfortunately, that had been done in some cases without first ensuring that the social and economic conditions were appropriate for the re-settlement of the emancipated slaves. Indeed in one country the separation of the slaves from their masters had been carried out by the army, and the slaves, unaware of what was intended, had resisted. In other countries the slaves, deprived of their only source of maintenance, migrated in search of food. That might serve to explain the recent traffic in African labour to Europe which had attracted the attention of the Economic and Social Council in July 1972. Although for the past five years the Secretary-General had been reminding all Member States that the advice of experts was available under the Advisory Services Programme in the field of human rights, so far not a single request for such advice had been received. Experts were at present working in the Sahara to determine how the level of subsistence could be raised to make resettlement of emancipated slaves economically feasible and socially acceptable. Hence chattel slavery was almost at an end.

However, in the opinion of many people, much less suffering was involved in chattel slavery than in some of the kindred practices forbidden under the Convention. There were many countries in both Asia and Latin America where serfdom and debt bondage embraced an appreciable percentage

of the population. In some of those countries Governments had, in recent years, with the aid of the specialized agencies, made impressive efforts to transform the situation. In others there had been little progress. In some countries where land reforms had been undertaken, political power was in fact in the hands of those who themselves exploited the tenants and it was rare for Governments to make a real effort to enforce the land reform legislation they had passed. That was a revealing statement and indicated the real reason why no machinery yet existed to implement the slavery Conventions. It was for the same reason that social development lagged, with such deplorable effects, behind the development of technology. The origins of the social strife in many countries today was directly attributable to various forms of slavery. Recently large scale massacres in several countries had been perpetrated by peoples formerly enslaved against those who had once been their masters.

* * * * *