

Ghana, past and present

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I am pleased to write the foreword to this edition of FIRST, dedicated to the State Visit which I am paying to the United Kingdom a week after the 50th Anniversary of Ghana's independence. My visit and its timing reflect the strong relations that exist between the United Kingdom and Ghana and the resolve of our two countries to strengthen these relations further after over one hundred years in which Ghana had been a British Colony.

The shores of Ghana, starting from the end of the 15th century, had been a principal conduit for the exchange of produce and goods between Africa and Europe. Our people's access to ample supplies of gold and pepper made them a prized trading partner to European entrepreneurs and their governments who dotted Ghana's coastline with numerous forts, trading posts and castles, many of which are still preserved as part of Ghana's tourist heritage. That was the fabled Gold Coast of European history. But, tragically, this commerce degenerated into a traffic in human beings to man the plantations of European landlords in the Americas and the Caribbean in the 18th and 19th centuries. We still carry the scars of that sad interlude in our relationship, though no longer as active hostility but instead as a firm determination to prove ourselves as equal human beings.

It is worth noting that Ghana's Golden Jubilee, which falls on 6th March 2007, also marks the 200th anniversary of the abolition of that inhuman commerce of slavery throughout the British Empire. We rejoice that when the American settlers had to resort to civil war in order to settle the issue of slave ownership, the right side won. Today our brothers in the Diaspora can return to a free Ghana as tourists, businessmen, scholars or just family.

The other underlying force in Ghana's struggle was that in all the individual states that comprised the colonial Gold Coast the majority of ordinary citizens never completely accepted the loss of their sovereign power to make laws and regulate their lives as they wished. In particular, a recurrent theme of our anti-colonial struggle was the resistance against periodic attempts to expropriate the land which is the source of living for most of our people. Thus, mercifully, the Gold Coast was spared the additional aggravations that afflicted the native African's life in the settler colonies of Eastern and Southern Africa.

Soldiers from the Gold Coast and other West African countries had been recruited to fight against fascism in Europe and Asia, serving with distinction in East Africa, Somalia, Ethiopia, Burma, Bangladesh and India. Thus, when the movements to liberate these regions from colonial rule boiled over after Hitler's war, soldiers and ex-servicemen from here became natural adherents of the anti-colonial movement. Back at home, they joined forces with libertarian intellectuals in a populist freedom movement to which the colonial powers had no response.

In this way Ghana ushered in the 'wind of change', the beginning of the end of colonial rule in Black Africa, on 6th March 1957. That historic event of Ghana's independence did not only mark a high point among our own people in their passionate fight against foreign rule. It also reverberated throughout Black Africa. And it did so with such force that within ten years most of the continent of Black Africa had achieved political independence, especially from Britain and France which had been the principal colonial powers.

Therefore Ghana's 50th birthday represents a landmark which we share with all Africans and our brothers and sisters in the diaspora. The same racism which had allowed otherwise Christian citizens in many European countries to treat Africans as commercial chattels had lingered on after Abolition, in an unspoken assumption that Black people would forever need to be led and managed by others, for reasons of our innate inferiority. It is my hope that a widely-shared celebration of this Golden Jubilee of Ghana will also mark an important stage on the road to the final abolition of all vestiges of racism in the relations between Africa and the rest of the world.

We are thankful that during these fifty years of independence, Ghana has achieved so much progress under the management of our own people. It is easy enough to catalogue the many episodes during the decades of the sixties, seventies and eighties when, as in other African countries, the course of nation building in Ghana encountered serious setbacks. Time and again, our people's hope for a free democratic existence, as the background for a stable national development, has seemed to be dimmed forever. Over and over, in Ghana as in numerous African countries, civilian and military dictatorships, accompanied by rampant abuse of human rights and the overthrow of the rule of law leading to

