Remarks on Racism, International Relations and Librarianship

by E. J. Josey

Madame President and officers of the American Library Association who are present, distinguished visitors, and distinguished librarians from around the world, I am honored to have been chosen for this international award for several reasons. First, I used to work for John Ames Humphrey when he was the State Librarian and Assistant Commissioner of Libraries in the state of New York. Secondly, Peter Paulson, who is now the head of the Forest Press, and I were colleagues at the New York State Library at the time of Mr. Humphrey’s role as Assistant Commissioner of Libraries. Both of us served on Mr. Humphrey’s management team. Thirdly, I never did think that I would be honored for my work in international relations, because so many other people are also involved in this arena and have contributed so much. Why have I been concerned about international relations? When I started out fighting racism in the American Library Association, in 1964, 34 years ago, with the ALA resolution against the four state library associations that continued to deny African American librarians membership in their organizations because of the color of their skin, I discovered that racism was pervasive in our association. Then, two years after I convened about 40 black librarians to meet in Chicago at the midwinter meeting of the American Library Association in 1970, which was the founding of the Black Caucus of the American Library Association, I discovered at the 1972 ALA midwinter meeting that racism was systemic in international relations as well. For when the American Library Association designated the parts of the world that it wanted to help with books for the 1972 celebration of International Book Year, Africa was the only continent that had been omitted. I was incensed. I was not involved in the official International Relations program in ALA at the time, but thus began my quest for information resources and recognition for my people wherever they lived in the diaspora.

Yes, racism is still alive and well in the international arena as it is in the domestic arena of our country.

It was in the 1976-77 year when I became officially involved in the international affairs of the American Library Association. When Clara Jones, the first African American President of the Association appointed me as a member of the International Relations Committee. The following year, 1977-78, Eric Moon assumed the presidency of the American Library Association and he discovered that ALA did not have a policy related to international relations. This was the case, in spite of the fact that the International Relations Committee (IRC) had been in existence since the turn of the century, and that some of the founding fathers of the association had been involved in international librarianship when they went to Great Britain to help librarians in the UK establish the Library Association in 1877, one year after the founding of ALA. Eric asked me to work with the IRC in developing policy for the Association. We held hearings for the membership, and within a year we developed the international relations policy for the Association. My odyssey in international librarianship and international relations followed my chairmanship of the IRC in 1977-78. I have worked very hard in this arena for many years. I do believe that the work we did by sensitizing our ALA membership about the terrible apartheid system, and what it had done to the majority population of South Africa, really contributed greatly to world wide condemnation and apartheid’s demise.

One year ago, when Barbara J. Ford came to the International Relations Committee and informed us that she planned to focus on the international arena during her presidential year, I was thrilled. I felt that finally we were going to do something about our global interest in information and also about our concern for freedom of expression around the world. We also felt that with this thrust our Association would give a higher priority than it had given to international relations in prior years. I am very proud that the members of the IRC and the special subcommittee that I appointed to work with Barbara seized the occasion and provided great ideas and support for Barbara’s year, which has been a great year in the international arena. While I do not believe that one year or two or three will do away with the problems of racism and inequality that I described earlier, I do believe that what has been accomplished will certainly help to eradicate some of the most blatant racist problems that exist around the globe. I am confident that the American Library Association via its International Relations Committee
will provide the leadership needed to help uproot racism abroad as well as at home.

Finally, we librarians who have gathered here in Washington DC from around the world must be careful that the new developments in information technology do not magnify and reinforce the divisions of class and race that exist in many countries as well as in our own country. Someone has said that "the more connected that some of us become the more disconnected most of us become." Let us use the new technology to bring the races and classes together, to make for a more perfect world providing information for all who need it to survive. Thank you for this recognition of my small efforts.

LETTER AGAINST BOMBING OF IRAQ
12/16/98

December 16, 1998
50 West 96th Street, #3D
New York NY 10025

Open Letter on the Bombing of Iraq,

The punitive air assault unleashed by the U.S. against the people of Iraq, December 16, 1998, is an appalling breach of international law, human rights and the peace of nations. As a result of years of embargo and inspection, the Iraqis clearly had no effective offensive capabilities and were also utterly defenseless.

Democratic and progressive professionals should make it known that this use of overwhelming destructive force against Iraq, which punishes a nation for its leaders' crimes, is nothing but military-technological barbarism. While it might have temporarily raised the poll ratings of a beleaguered president awaiting impeachment, it further immiserates the Iraqi people and degrades American democracy in the eyes of the world.

We progressive librarians, library workers, and library school students oppose completely the punishment meted out for non-compliance with Clinton's will. We declare our solidarity with the Iraqi civilians and civil society which will continue to suffer the consequences of this cynical exhibition of brute force.

Mark Rosenzweig, Hofstra University, NY

Jos Aenemaet, Oregon State University; Bette Anton, University of California-Berkeley; Stephanie Archer, CA; L. Ball, US; Barbera Bass, US; Julie Bauer, graduate student, Catholic University of America, Washington DC; Sanford Berman, Hennepin County Library, MN; Bryan Beaugez, US; Patricia Bellamy, University of Toronto, Ontario, Canada; Herb Biblo, Long Island Library Research Council, NY; June Bourgeois, TX; Kate Bradley, Bellevue Community College, WA; Antonio M. Calvo, graduate student, San Jose State University, CA; Aimee J. Camp, Pueblo Library District, CO; Cathy Camper, MN; Tom Childs, Douglas College, British Columbia, Canada; Lisa S. Colvin, graduate student, University of California at Los Angeles; Kathryn Constant, Emporia State Univ. and Portland Community College, OR; Janet Cronbach, graduate student, US; Alison Curtis, Vancouver Public Library, British