

Caribbean Regional Seminar on The Implementation of the Third International Decade for the Eradication of Colonialism: the United Nations at 70 : taking stock of the Decolonisation Agenda

Managua 19th – 21st May 2015

This seminar was held in Managua the capital city of Nicaragua and was attended by approximately 100 delegates. These comprised Ambassadors and committee members of the C24 (so known_ as the original committee was made up of 24 members) Administering Powers, representatives from the member states of the United Nations, representatives of United Nations Funds and Programmes, delegates from the Non-Self-Governing Territories (of which St Helena was one) experts representing the various regions and non-governmental organisations(NGO's).

The seminar was conducted by HE Xavier Lasso Mendoza, Permanent Representative of Ecuador to the UN and Chair of the Special Committee, with participation from members of the Committee from: Chile, China, Cuba, Ecuador, Ethiopia, Indonesia, Islamic Republic of Iran, Nicaragua, Papua New Guinea, Russian Federation, Syrian Arab Republic and Venezuela (Bolivarian Republic of), Two Administering Powers (France and Britain) attended as observers. (The British Ambassador attended on the morning of 20th to support the representatives from the Falkland Island, and St Helena as we were scheduled to speak, but left at lunchtime to catch a plane so was not present for our presentations as the schedules over ran). Other Member States participating as observers were: Algeria, Argentina, Australia, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Mexico, Morocco, Spain and Uruguay. Also represented at the seminar was the United Nations Development Programme and the United Nations regional Commission – Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean.

The framework established for discussions was as follows:

- *Principles established by the General Assembly for the conduct of free and genuine decolonisation processes, on a case-by-case basis, consistent with United Nations principles and practices;*
- *How to enable the peoples of Non-Self-Governing Territories, on a case-by-case basis, to decide their future political status with complete knowledge and awareness of the full range of political options available to them, including independence;*
- *How to ensure, on a case-by-case basis, that all political exercises relating to decolonisation processes are carried out in an atmosphere free from intimidation and outside interference and allow for the open expression of the interests and aspirations of the peoples of the remaining Non-Self-Governing Territories;*
- *How to ensure, on a case-by-case basis, that all decolonisation processes are preceded by adequate and unbiased campaigns of political education.*

The seminar was held in six sessions over three days and was reviewed by regions – Non-Self-Governing Territories (NSGT) in the Caribbean region, the Pacific region and other regions (which included Falkland Islands, Gibraltar, Western Sahara, and St Helena).

On the first day, 19th May, the opening speech by the Chairman of the Special Committee, HE Xavier Lasso Mendoza (Ecuador) made special reference to St Helena being represented for only the third time and the length of time taken for the journey from St Helena to Managua (something I also made reference to in my presentation). Usually New Caledonia gets the accolade of the longest journey but it was no contest this year! This was followed by a welcome from the host nation and then a letter was read out from the Secretary-General of the United Nations Ban Ki-moon, where he highlighted the progress made in the decolonising agenda since its founding in 1945. ***“In 1946 there were 72 territories on the list of Non-Self-Governing Territories, administered by 8 Member States. Today 17 Territories with a total population of 1.6 million people and administered by four Administering Powers, remain on the list”.***

There followed presentations on the role of the Special Committee within the context of the broad theme of the seminar. Then the status of NSGT in the Caribbean region and then the Pacific region was discussed from the perspective of their representatives followed by statements by experts and related comments and statements followed.

On the second day there were further responses to the presentations of the day before. I was one of the delegates that responded to the presentation of Peter Clegg from Bristol University – Expert on Caribbean NSGT. He was discussing some of the problems in the relationship between the UK and its territories and but he also cited:

“allegations of widespread sexual exploitation of girls in St Helena and the suggestion that both local and UK authorities were slow to investigate the claims”

I responded that his credentials were as an expert on the Caribbean and as there were no historical or geographical links between the Caribbean and St Helena which would allow him to extend his area of expertise. I acknowledged that there was such a problem, but that it was not endemic and we were not complacent but that we were dealing with it through the courts, with recognised safeguarding measures and putting systems in place. Furthermore we were awaiting the report from QC Sasha Wass who was appointed by British Prime Minister David Cameron.

There followed a review of the Pacific Region with presentations from the representatives from the region, experts and NGOs and related discussions. Then it was the turn for the review in other regions in the Falkland Islands, Gibraltar, Frente Polisario (Western Sahara) and St Helena; this too was followed by discussions. This particular session was anticipated as having the most contentious issues and it lived up to expectations with animated discussions as all these territories, with the exception of St Helena, of course, were in dispute over sovereignty which has remained unresolved for many years.

The final day 21st May was of course St Helena Day – a fact I had mentioned the previous day in my presentation and several of the delegates started by wishing me “Happy St Helena Day” and “Best wishes to St Helena on her national day”. There was quite a lot of interest and curious questions about how we celebrated the day, what national foods, what fruits, what exports, how people live, education on the island and the aspirations of our people. I feel I answered as fully and as honestly as I could in the time allowed.

There followed the last plenary session with summarising of the three days of the seminar and the closing statements, one of which was by the Ambassador to the United Nations for Nicaragua and she made special mention of thanks to St Helena for travelling so far. Most delegates were meeting again in New York in June 2015 for the substantive session of the

Special Committee but I gave my apologies as I would not have returned to the island until the beginning of June.

After the closing of the seminar we were taken in convoy to visit the Masaya Volcano, which is still active as witnessed by large clouds of sulphur gases constantly emitted, but the last lava flow had been in 2012. Then we were bussed to Granada and 'Isletas del Gran Lago de Nicaragua' which is a very large lake (much bigger than St Helena) and had picturesque small islands scattered around. On the way back to the hotel for the farewell dinner we made an unscheduled detour and found ourselves at the Presidential Palace – the President, HE Daniel Ortega Saavedra, had expressed a wish to meet with the delegates. There were formal introductions and discussions which were televised (spotted myself on TV in the departure lounge of Managua Airport the next day but could not understand as it was broadcasted in Spanish!) As a parting gift all delegates were presented with a very large coffee table book of scenes of Nicaragua. I have donated my copy to the Library.

The seminar presented good networking opportunities especially with other small island territories like Samoa, New Caledonia, Turks and Cacaos, the Falklands and Guam. It was of particular interest to note similar challenges like protection of local peoples / indigenous population rights and values, way of life and culture, protection of local jobs, sustainable development, economy of scale, nationality status and protection thereof, increased budgetary pressures, imports and transportation costs, biodiversity and natural disasters. Thankfully this is not the case in St Helena as we do not have natural disaster on the scale of some islands that have to cope with hurricanes, volcanos and tidal waves.

I feel that the seminar was not only a good experience for me, but also for St Helena as it helped to raise our profile internationally making more people aware not just of our existence but also a possible future destination for a holiday. People also remarked that they felt it was a real understanding of St Helena they had experienced which was more personal than the list of statistics and information usually circulated.

Pamela Ward Pearce, MLC

June 2015