

## THE UNIVERSAL HOUSE OF JUSTICE

Ridván 1996

To the Followers of Bahá'u'lláh in Africa

Dearly loved Friends,

You come to the Four Year Plan with an extraordinary history of achievement, which indicates that you are well equipped spiritually and administratively, and in the inherent potential of your people, to respond successfully to the Plan's central aim to advance the process of entry by troops. In whatever direction south of the Sahara one may look—whether to the eastern, western, central or southern region of the continent—portents of great, imminent expansion are evident. The torch of faith burns brightly in your hearts, setting our spirits aglow with gladness at the scale of your attainments and the magnificent possibilities that are now yours.

The bright hope inspired by such observations is justified by thrilling facts. The spiritual endowments of Africa derive naturally from the creative forces universally released by the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh, but these have been marvellously enhanced by the continent's direct associations with the Channels of such forces: the ship transporting the Blessed Beauty on His exile to the Holy Land touched briefly its northern shores; the Centre of the Covenant spent extended periods in Egypt before and after His historic visit to the West. The continent was also twice crossed from south to north by the beloved Guardian. Bahá'u'lláh favoured the black peoples by making a specific reference to them when, as the Master testified, He compared them to the "*black pupil of the eye*" through which "*the light of the spirit shineth forth*".

African Bahá'í history had its beginnings in Egypt, which was opened to the Faith during the period of the ministry of Bahá'u'lláh; it gathered momentum during the ministry of `Abdu'l-Bahá when Bahá'í localities were established in South Africa and Tunisia. But the early effects of these spiritual endowments became more obvious with the remarkable success of the two-year Africa Project (1951-53) when 16 territories were opened, bringing to 25 the total number of countries and islands in which Bahá'ís resided; this preceded the opening of the 33 virgin territories called for in the beloved Guardian's Ten Year Global Crusade, a period of astonishing development in Africa that evoked the admiration and praise of Shoghi Effendi as many people from different tribes entered the Cause, a number of administrative institutions were formed, and it became possible to raise up the Mother Temple of Africa in the heart of the continent. During the course of these rapid developments, the African believers themselves, through sacrificial effort as teachers and pioneers, arose to champion the Cause of God, manifesting the profundity of their response to the Message of the New Day.

In the countries lying to the north where programmes of public teaching cannot now be pursued, the friends have continued for many years to maintain their posts with circumspection and heroic fortitude. Not only have they kept the flame of faith alive in their hearts, they also

endeavour to transmit the fire of the love of God to members of their families, including their children and youth, in anticipation of the day when freedom to openly proclaim their religion and conduct their community affairs is secured.

With immense gratification we now look back over just a few decades during which Africa attained the largest number of National Spiritual Assemblies of any continent; moreover, Africa's Local Spiritual Assemblies amount to a substantial percentage of the world's total. The prodigious output of energy devoted to expansion and consolidation has included major endeavours to train the believers and to mount and maintain development projects. As a result the African Bahá'í community can boast of notable progress in the establishment of a number of primary and secondary schools and training institutes. A source of much of this energy in recent times has been the African youth, who have increasingly demonstrated exemplary dedication and vigour in their Bahá'í activities. In the field of external affairs, the African community, whether in small or large states, has shown a boldness, a creativity, and a tenacity that have resonated in the worldwide proclamation of the Faith and the promotion of its vital interests.

Clearly, then, Africa is poised to register a victory for the Cause that will reaffirm its position among the front ranks of our world community. The time is critical, and you must act promptly to realize this prospect. We therefore urge our African brothers and sisters to take immediate account of their strengths, needs and opportunities, and then resolve to turn the challenge posed by these conditions into the means of success. You will of necessity give concentrated attention to various plans and programmes of activity if you are to advance to new stages of entry by troops, but simultaneously certain underlying requisites will claim your special vigilance and exertion. These are the elimination of tribal prejudice, the transformation of prevailing social practices, and the fostering of education.

Tribal conflict is one of the most pressing issues facing Africa. This must be dealt with in the heart of every faithful follower of Bahá'u'lláh and resolutely overcome through the collective will of every local and national Bahá'í community. Indeed, how can the lovers of the Blessed Beauty allow tribal prejudice and rivalry to be practised in their midst when He has made unity the pivotal principle and goal of His Faith? Hatred and animosity based on tribe, like those based on race, blight the human spirit and arrest the development of the society that accommodates them. If outside the Bahá'í community in recent years influential persons and public officials have been able to see the practical benefit of bringing diverse groups together towards unity, how much more should it be possible for those imbued with the spirit of our Teachings to strive to eliminate within the Bahá'í fellowship the unsavoury characteristics of tribal division and disunity. It is imperative and urgent in the current state of society for the Bahá'ís so to practise genuine unity among themselves and in their relations to others that they may become renowned as a new people in the eyes of all Africans. Such a demonstration will attract divine confirmations and greatly reinforce their power to succeed in spreading the Teachings.

Much of what distinguishes African life is to be found in patterns of behaviour displayed in the tribe and particularly in the family. Increasingly, urban life threatens to destroy the positive qualities of such patterns. Since change is inevitable if progress is to be made by any African society, a primary challenge to Bahá'ís is to preserve and improve those wholesome aspects of tribal and family custom that are in accord with the Bahá'í Teachings and to dispense with those that are not. Such a challenge must be embraced with the understanding that the Book of God is the standard by which to weigh all forms of behaviour. While unwavering action is necessary, wisdom and tact and patience must, of course, be exercised. Let it be understood, too, that

Africans are not alone in the struggle to change certain age-old practices. People everywhere have customs which must be abandoned so as to clear the path along which their societies must evolve towards that glorious, new civilization which is to be the fruit of Bahá'u'lláh's stupendous Revelation. Indeed, in no society on earth can there be found practices which adequately mirror the standards of His Cause. His own truth-bearing Words clarify the matter: *"The summons and the message which We gave were never intended to reach or to benefit one land or one people only. Mankind in its entirety must firmly adhere to whatsoever hath been revealed and vouchsafed unto it. Then and only then will it attain unto true liberty. The whole earth is illuminated with the resplendent glory of God's Revelation."*

The acute inadequacy of plans and programmes to educate Africa's people poses a particular challenge to the followers of Bahá'u'lláh in that continent, for He has emphasized the importance of education for all; and individuals ought to be taught at least to read and write. The education of which Bahá'u'lláh spoke includes both spiritual and material aspects. The lack of such education affects the ability of people to achieve true progress. This matter should be of the keenest interest to all segments of the community. Parents have a special responsibility to see that their children, both boys and girls, receive an education; and they must take care that the girls are not left behind, since well-educated girls are a guarantee of the excellence of future society; indeed, preference should, if necessary, be given to their education. Closely linked to this concern is the principle of the equality of men and women taught by Bahá'u'lláh. It is also highly desirable for adults, both men and women, who are illiterate to participate in literacy programmes, so that gradually all Bahá'ís will be able to read the Word of God for themselves. The Bahá'í community is not fully equipped to undertake what responsible authorities have neglected to do for the education of the people; however, the Bahá'í institutions at all levels are urged to give attention to these critical needs, as circumstances permit.

Bearing in mind these three foregoing considerations, you can move vigorously and wisely to tackle the manifold tasks implied by the Plan's emphasis on advancing the process of entry by troops. An extension of your efforts to effect both expansion and consolidation on a wholly new scale is imperative. The one suggests a powerful outward thrust of your teaching activities to cover the length and breadth of your countries, reaching the remotest areas with the Divine Message. The other indicates a drive to consolidate and multiply your gains through an ever-deepening penetration of spiritual knowledge of the Faith into the hearts of the believers, a systematic development of human resources, and a marked improvement in the functioning of your national and, particularly, your local institutions.

In all this exertion, the three components of the process—the individual, the institutions and the community—must assume their respective responsibilities. We especially expect you all to pursue every means at your disposal that will bring about the realization of an organic unity between the Local Spiritual Assembly and the community, and thereby establish a sharp contrast to the fragmentation of present-day social life. Thus, we long to see the individual African believers arise in greater numbers to claim the Faith of Bahá'u'lláh as their own and to take on the requisite tasks of teaching and administering a rapidly expanding Faith. And we look for accumulating evidence that the Spiritual Assemblies are taking to heart their God-given mandate and are conscientiously fulfilling their obligations to Bahá'u'lláh to foster the growth and development of vibrant communities in which adults, youth and children are more and more integrated and active. To fulfil these expectations is to demonstrate to a sceptical world the power of the Faith to hold aloft a new standard for the guidance of the nations, and eventually to attract the disillusioned masses to the security of God's Faith.

What specific actions, you may well ask, would indicate that you are fulfilling the basic requirement of the Plan in Africa? A reply would include mention of the following. Whatever the state of expansion in a community, take the next steps to increase enrolments, deepen the believers and strengthen the teaching force. Where entry by troops is in progress, intensify your efforts to stimulate further increase in the number of believers, while at the same time conducting a programme of training that will deepen the new believers and raise up new teachers on a continuing basis. Maximize action to bring families into the Faith by encouraging individuals in their duty to endeavour to lead as many of their family members as possible to the light of divine guidance. Regularize efforts to teach among the sub-Saharan Muslims. Proliferate the publication of Bahá'í literature and audio-cassette tapes, especially in vernacular languages. Swell the number of Local Spiritual Assemblies elected by their communities without help from outside. Support more abundantly the Funds of the Faith. Orient believers from among the traditional rulers to the Teachings, so that they will find appropriate ways to serve the Faith.

Moreover, extend provisions for children regularly to attend Bahá'í classes for their spiritual training. Give consistent attention to involving the youth in the expansion and consolidation work and to opening channels of activity suited to their talents and necessary for their development into mature Bahá'ís. Increase the number and effectiveness of observances of Nineteen Day Feasts. Expand the use of music and drama in the proclamation and teaching work, an effort in which Africa has already distinguished itself. Multiply plans and programmes to raise the status of women and to encourage the active support of men in such endeavours. Extend the range of your exertions in the fields of external affairs and social and economic development.

You will readily appreciate, then, the emphasis placed on multiplying the number of training institutes; for without them it will be impossible to meet the needs of hugely expanding communities. In some places, the friends may find it possible to offer sites and facilities for these essential operations, which must be located in as many areas as necessary to provide regular and well-organized training to increasing numbers of believers. The programmes of the institutes must be designed to instil in the participants a good understanding of the fundamental verities of the Faith and to help them acquire skills and abilities that will enable them to serve the Faith effectively.

Immediately after Ridván your National Spiritual Assemblies will initiate efforts to formulate, in consultation with the Counsellors, the details of the Four Year Plan, country by country. To ensure that the Plan is broadly based and responsive to the needs of all areas of a country, the participation of the Local Spiritual Assemblies and individuals, in evolving their own local plans and in following the lines of action to be clearly laid down, will be essential.

Dear Friends, we are acutely conscious of the crushing difficulties that afflict life in Africa: the conditions that have caused a flood of refugees on the continent, the horrors created by ethnic conflict, the political unrest, the economic distress, the high incidence of hunger and disease, the horrendous natural disasters. But, paradoxical as it may seem, there exist in all of these the very possibilities of your success. Your ability to endure and forge ahead is reinforced in the assurance given by the Divine Physician, Who anticipated all these conditions and prescribed a sure remedy. His prescriptions have been placed in your hands.

Therefore, we remind you of the noble ambitions the beloved Guardian held for you as a people in a continent that has "*a great contribution to make to the advancement of world*

*civilization.*" May such memories resound afresh in your hearts, quickening your will to fulfil the major aim of the Plan before you, and setting a pace for your actions like the urgent rhythm of drums pulsating throughout your immensely potent, far-stretching land.

Our ardent prayer at the Holy Threshold on your behalf is that the divine storehouses of heaven may pour out their bounties upon you all, healing your ills, magnifying your powers, and enabling you to achieve victory upon victory.

[SIGNED: THE UNIVERSAL HOUSE OF JUSTICE]