

# Opening address given by John Kotelawala (Bandung, 18 April 1955)


**Caption:** On 18 April 1955, in his opening address, the Prime Minister of Ceylon, John Kotelawala, calls on the countries of Africa and Asia taking part in the Bandung Conference to unite against colonialism.

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Address by the  
Right Hon. Sir John Kotelawala, K.B.E., M.P.,  
Prime Minister of Ceylon,  
at the Opening Session of  
the Asian-African Conference  
at Bandung

18th April, 1955



Opening Speech of Sir John Kotelawala, Prime Minister of  
Ceylon, at the Asian-African Conference at Bandung,  
18th April, 1955

PRIME MINISTERS, MINISTERS AND FRIENDS :

WE meet today on an historic occasion. A critical juncture has arrived not only in the history of the Afro-Asian region but in the history of mankind. Not merely those nations now menaced by the immediate threat of war, but with them, and because of them, the entire human race stands on the brink of chaos, ready at the least miscalculation or lapse of vigilance to plunge for ever into the abyss. The Great Powers who within recent generations have guided the destinies of mankind have brought themselves and us to this calamitous pass. The danger that confronts us now is one in comparison with which the fall of a dynasty or the disintegration of an Empire is a thing of little moment. The danger is in fact nothing less than the total destruction of that collective civilisation which the nations of the world have laboured over the centuries to produce—nothing less than the complete annihilation of mankind.

If this danger is to be averted, it is clear that what is wanted is a shift of emphasis, a change of heart, in the methods whereby the statesmen and leaders of today are trying to preserve what remains of world peace. The argument of physical force must yield to the argument of spiritual power. Hitherto the approach adopted to problems of international peace has been one based on considerations of relative military strength. The old heresy dies hard—that if you want peace you must prepare for war. As a result, nations have armed themselves to the teeth against neighbours and increased their armed might to a point where the least dispute can trigger a conflagration sufficient to involve the whole world. Today, the nations are indeed prepared for war—and further than ever from the prospect of peace. Their strength brings no security, their armaments no defence.

The pass to which humanity has been brought by the domination and doctrine of force is the most vivid demonstration of the bankruptcy of force. Of what advantage is it to hold sway over vast territories, to have at one's command innumerable armies, to be able at the touch of a button to unleash the deadliest weapons science can invent, if, with all this, we are unable to rid ourselves of fear and hysteria and despair ?



No one delights in this age of anxiety. All the world wants peace—the big nations no less than the small ones. But the great powers have failed to achieve it, and have made it perilously difficult for others to maintain, because their negotiations have been tainted by mutual suspicion and mistrust and their policies governed and conditioned by a panic-stricken race for military superiority. This addiction to the philosophy of fear, this competition in the technology of terror, has led to the inevitable breakdown of every concrete suggestion put forward in the west for the limitation of armaments or for the banning of nuclear weapons. The nations on whom the responsibility has hitherto devolved of preserving the world's present armed truce, or planning its future peace, are at a loss. They are hag-ridden by the demon of progress, the monsters their scientists have created. Neither their science nor their statesmanship can afford them any protection. Their diplomacy has failed in its efforts to devise machinery for the limitations of armaments by mutual consent or to set up an acceptable international authority for the inspection and supervision of nuclear weapons.

In these urgent and vital tasks, where the wisdom of the West has failed, is it possible that the nations of Asia and Africa can hope to succeed? I think it is. Have the nations of this region in fact anything to offer? I think they have. Has the time come to offer it? I think it has. I say, then, in all seriousness and in all humility that the peoples of this region have it in their power to apply to the problems of the present-day world, and for the first time in recent history, that traditional respect for the spiritual values of life and for the dignity of the human personality which is the distinguishing feature of all their great religions.

Since I speak as a Buddhist I will venture to quote from the *Dhammapada*, that great repository of Buddhist devotion and practice, a verse in which we are vividly reminded of the nature of the spiritual values of which I spoke just now. It reads :—

If a man were to conquer in battle a thousand times a thousand men, and another conquer one, himself, he indeed is the greatest of conquerors. (*Dhammapada*, 103).

A continent, or an assembly of nations from different continents, which accepts this philosophy and attempts, however imperfectly and unsuccessfully, to practise it, can speak with authority in the counsels of the world and has a right to be heard. And this authority, this right to be heard, is not diminished or abated by the fact that



some of the countries concerned, my own among them, are small, and all are relatively weak, impoverished and underdeveloped.

The countries of this region have a further claim upon the attention of the mighty and upon the deliberations of the peace-makers. We of Asia and Africa have a common interest in peace, and a common desire to achieve it, though some of us differ as to how it should be done. Not one country in this whole region manufactures nuclear weapons ; most of them are ill equipped even with the conventional implements of war that date from the pre-atomic age. When the great powers of the West talk peace, their chances of agreement are weakened by the fact that each suspects the others' strength. We by contrast come to the conference table weak and relatively unarmed. We have no thermonuclear bombs in our pockets, no weapons of chemical or bacteriological warfare up our sleeves, no plans for armament factories or blueprints for ever more deadly methods of genocide in our brief cases.

We have however, I venture to believe, something which the great and the mighty lack. That something is the strength of our weakness—the ability which our very defencelessness confers to offer ourselves as mediators in the dispute between the giants of Communism and anti-Communism which, if fought out to an end, will deluge the world in blood and leave the earth infected with atomic radiation for generations yet unborn or never to be born.

I urge then that on behalf of the nations represented here, comprising as they do some two-thirds of the population of the world, we here and now offer formally our services as mediators. I am confident that all of you assembled here will wish to make such an offer, and that it will carry to the outside world the weight and cogency of our unanimity. In a world driven to the verge of madness by the omnipresent spectres of fear and violence and hatred, from which it is unable to escape, it is our historic privilege and our solemn duty to offer the hope, however belated and remote, of a way out.

Moreover, I am confident that among us in this region can be found a group acceptable to both parties in the great world dispute, and capable as an impartial intermediary of working out a plan for peace and creating suitable machinery to implement it. I am confident too that to such a group we can delegate the authority to speak on behalf of Afro-Asia as a whole, and that the authority so delegated will not lightly be disregarded abroad.



A few months hence the Charter of the United Nations is due to come up for revision. The countries of Asia and Africa will then have an historic opportunity to demand that the U. N. O. be reconstructed so that it can be in fact what it was intended to be in theory—an effective instrument of peace, and not merely a forum for the wrangling of opposed power groups. When the United Nations Organisation was originally conceived at Yalta, the Big Three who mooted it looked forward to a continuation after the war of the wartime alliance between their countries. This assumption underlay the whole structure of the United Nations, dominated as it was by the five permanent members of the Security Council, each armed with their big stick—the power of veto. It was hoped that these five countries, with their strength of arms, would be able to intervene unitedly and effectively in any dispute anywhere and act as custodians of the peace.

Now, ten years after the United Nations was founded, the wartime alliance has broken up into two hostile camps which themselves threaten the peace they were intended to safeguard. They are both armed with the most terrifying weapons of destruction that man has ever possessed and they seem more likely to use them to annihilate the world than to preserve its peace. It is not the United Nations which has preserved the uneasy peace of the last decade. In all the major issues of world politics, such as the Korean and Indo-Chinese disputes, negotiations for settlement have had to be carried on outside the framework of the United Nations. And the new Asia and Africa can justly take pride in the not unimportant role that some of the nations of this region have played in helping to bring these settlements about. But as the time approaches to revise the Charter, let us face the fact that the United Nations organisation no longer reflects the realities of world politics today. What is needed, and what we of Asia and Africa can appropriately demand, is that the United Nations Organization should be so reconstituted as to become a fully representative organ of the peoples of the world, in which all nations can meet on free and equal terms.

The time has gone by when the function of small countries in world affairs could be summed up by the words used by one of the war leaders at Yalta. “The eagle should permit the small birds to sing and care not whereof they sing”. Today, on the contrary, the salvation of the world depends not on the great powers but on the lesser countries, many of whom are still voiceless in the councils of the nations. And I am sure that if Asia and Africa put forward



an unambiguous and united demand for the reconstitution of the United Nations, by abolishing the Veto and converting the Security Council into a fully elected body responsible to the General Assembly, it will meet with powerful response from all the smaller nations of the world.

Such a reform will also throw open the United Nations to those countries, whatever their political character, who are at present being kept out by the exercise of the veto by one great power or another. And for my part, I am strongly of opinion that a place should be found within the United Nations, at least as associate members, for those peoples who are still subject to colonial rule. Though they might have to be represented initially by nominees of the imperial powers let us hope it will not be long before colonialism is cast into the junk-heap of history, and these peoples are able to take their place in equality and with pride beside the other independent nations of the world.

The Asian and African countries, if they stand together, can unquestionably make their voice heard in world affairs and serve as the mediatory and the guardians of world peace. But the rest of the world will not listen to us unless we are ourselves united in goodwill and free from mutual conflicts. We have to prove by example to other nations that our own international disputes can be settled without resort to force. This conference will be missing a great opportunity if, before we part, we do not pledge ourselves, solemnly and wholeheartedly, to abjure war as a means of settling differences, to resolve all disputes by peaceful negotiation and to abstain from any form of interference in each other's internal affairs. What does this involve in practice ? I think it requires, apart from the mutual pledges I have indicated, that we should set up some adequate organisation to which any disputes arising between any of us can be referred for peaceful settlement. When we have removed whatever sources of mistrust, suspicion and fear that subsist between ourselves, then, and only then, can we stand before the rest of the world and speak to them loud and bold the message of peace, armed with the authority of moral force.

We, the nations of the new Asia and Africa, whatever our language, whatever our faiths, whatever our form of government, whatever the colour of our skins—black, brown or yellow—have one thing in common : we are all poor and underdeveloped. Centuries of servitude and stagnation have left their mark, a dire heritage of poverty and ignorance, upon the masses of our peoples. All our



ideologies and religions urge us, in the name of social justice and human compassion, to rid our countries of this evil of poverty, the times demand of us that we should do it, also in the name of peace. Poverty is the greatest of social evils from which all others spring. Poverty creates envy between countries and covetousness of each other's possessions : it sets individual against individual and nation against nation. From economic plenty, on the other hand—not the plenty achieved by the exploitation of man by man or nation by nation, but the plenty attained by mutual co-operation for the common good—from such plenty springs both national and international peace. It is my earnest hope, therefore, that this conference will give rise to effective and concrete proposals for economic co-operation within our region, so that we may all march together towards the common goal of prosperity.

As I conclude, the subject of peace is very much in my thoughts and very near to my heart as a follower of one of the great religions to which Asia has given birth. The heritage of Buddhism is one of the most precious possessions of my country and it is a heritage which we share with several other countries represented at this conference. Indeed, whatever religion we profess, we cannot but be at one on the question of peace. For the great teachers of all religions are agreed that it is not through hatred and violence, but through compassion, peace and goodwill, that mankind can find salvation. As a Buddhist, I should like to quote to you the words in which the Enlightened One expressed this fundamental truth.

“Not at any time are enmities appeased here through enmity, but they are appeased through non-enmity. This is the eternal law.”

In whatever terms we choose to formulate it, it is this message above all that we can offer to a world which appears to be bent on destroying itself through mutual enmities. Here is a wisdom which draws its power from the spiritual inheritance of our countries but which has never been more significant or more urgent than it is today for all mankind. If we can conduct our discussions here in its light and by its guidance, if we can maintain and consolidate the goodwill that has brought us here together today, if we can shew it forth, in practice as in precept, as an example to all nations and disseminate its spirit among them—then surely Bandung will be a name to reverberate in history and earn the gratitude and blessings of ages to come.

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