

PEOPLE AND PLACES

The Smiling Children of China

by Shaheen Anam back from Beijing

YES, there were powerful and reputed women from all over the world who made speeches, mesmerised audiences and contributed to the success of the NGO Forum. But, there was also another very special group of people at the Fourth World Conference on Women (FWCW) whose names will never be mentioned in the Platform for Action nor the Beijing Declaration. Yet they were, in many ways, the heroes, heroines of the NGO Forum and held it together all through the hassles of arrival, the lost luggage, the accommodation problems and the torrential rain. They were thousands of volunteers, boys and girls aged 15 to 18. These smiling beautiful children without whom perhaps the Forum would not have been possible.

Declared by many including Gertrude Mongella, the Secretary-General of the world conference, the biggest conference the UN has ever organised, it has been estimated that at least 25,000 people, mostly women, participated at the NGO gathering alone representing 189 countries from every corner of the globe.

Time and space had to be allocated to accommodate 5,000 activities in 10 days including workshops, seminars, videos, exhibits and 130 cultural events. With language posing as the greatest hurdle (one can only imagine the different languages being spoken) and communication breaking down to just 'yes' and 'no' the organisers faced no easy task. Ofcourse, there were

rity and comfort.

The volunteers were right there to help when we arrived, tired and weary, at 1pm at the Beijing Airport. We were expecting hours of delay, security checks and harassment as reported by the Western Press. Much to our surprise, we did not face any of the so-called harassment by Chinese officials from the time we landed till we reached our apartment buildings. The first sign that attracted our attention read: "Be a worthy host to the Fourth World Conference on Women". From then on, and during our 10-day stay in Houtou, we could see that same sign on roads and highways. The way the general public behaved towards us we know that the Chinese people were really being the most worthy and at their

on the other hand, were shy but always polite. It did not take us long to discover that they were just like young people anywhere else in the world, curious, eager to learn and full of enthusiasm. What was different about them was the way they had been motivated to volunteer their time to help and assist others in a pleasant way. Liu Chin, a beautiful 16-year-old who studies English at a school in Beijing said that she was excited and willing to do this job because for the first time in her life she got an opportunity to meet people from other parts of the world. The volunteers worked on 10-hour shifts, round-the-clock, we saw them when we returned late at night, and again in the morning, always looking fresh and cheerful as a daisy.



The Chinese volunteers who did such a magnificent job of providing services to the delegates.



The smiling children at the inauguration.

Their pleasant behaviour, their commitment to work and their patience won the hearts of one and every person at the NGO Forum. Yes, if there is one thing that the China Organising Committee can be really proud of it is the volunteers they succeeded in mobilising.

For the Chinese, it was an organising nightmare and given the scale and magnitude of the task, they came out of it with flying colours. problems and mismanagement at various levels. The apartments were newly constructed therefore the plumbing often did not work, the buses were overcrowded and not frequent enough, the Forum site was too scattered. Yet in everything one could sense and feel that those smiling volunteers were making every effort and were working day and night to ensure the smooth functioning of the NGO Forum, our secu-

best. The volunteers went far beyond their call of duty when they insisted on lifting our suitcases at times six flights of stairs and volunteering to do it again for those whose suitcases got mixed up, and all this was done with that ever sweet and pleasant smile.

Given all the propaganda we have been fed with regarding communist countries we were at first hesitant to talk to the volunteers. They,

Shan was a very good-looking boy of 17 who said he liked the job and did not mind running up and down six flights of stairs at least 10 times a day. A group of 6 volunteers were responsible for cleaning our apartment building, seeing to it that everything worked and for the security of our belongings. Everytime we left the apartment building Shan would find out our rooms and bed-numbers and took up a bunch of keys to lock our rooms. Not only that, on our return, he would again go up to unlock our doors. Needless to say none of us ever complained of lost items.

So what is it in their culture, background or training that made them so pleasant, so willing to help and so conscientious towards their work. Is it just their eastern culture? Or a mix of eastern culture which extols the virtue of humility and hospitality and the discipline of the communist regime? Honestly, for those of us from countries where social values and discipline are fast-eroding among young people, it was a refreshing and welcome discovery.

The interesting thing was they did not appear to look oppressed or forced nor were they abnormally elated

with the situation. They just seemed like regular teenagers who had been assigned to do a certain job and they were making an effort to do it to the best of their ability.

We learnt that 15,000 volunteers from schools and colleges all over China with at least a minimum knowledge of English were assigned to take care of the day-to-day needs of the participants. They were engaged in jobs

such as cleaning the apartments, including the toilets, serving food in cafeterias, arranging for transportation to and from the NGO Forum site, working at the Business Centre, and be generally available to answer all queries which sometimes ranged from the sensible to the utter ridiculous.

Back home today I remember all the little things those boys and girls did for

us, for example, holding the beaded curtain at the entrance of the restaurant to let us pass through or bringing our food to the table if our hands were too full of papers or holding an umbrella over our heads when boarding a bus while raining. But most of all, I remember their smiles — the ever-ready smile — which reminded us of sunshine even on the most miserable and damp rainy day.



Members of Bangladesh NGO delegation conducting one of the many workshops they organised during the Forum.



Bangladesh NGO delegates mingling with other international participants.



One of the 5000 activities in progress.

Pressure Mounts for Slave Trade Compensation

Shepherd Mutamba writes from London

Blacks in Europe are strongly campaigning for compensation from former slave masters of the West. As Gemini News Service reports, the issue of reparation is attracting support in Britain, where the question of race relations is rarely out of the news.

mand compensation and return of their land.

Queen Elizabeth's apology this year for England's part in enslaving the native Maori of New Zealand.

Slavery was officially abolished in the 1830s but it is believed that the trade continued after that date.

The movement targets every country — in particular, Britain and the United States — which they can prove unjustly benefited from slavery.

There is authentic evidence, according to the movement, of letters bills of sales, names of slave ships, buyers and sellers of slaves on which to base the claims.

Says Wilmont: "Because Britain was the centre of the slave trade it has huge numbers of nationals whose countries suffered from slavery and colonisation. We are therefore educating each other on reparations and the gospel will spread to the whole world."

But the movement faces a daunting administrative task in coordinating the vast groundwork to achieve the compensation.

Their way round the problem, so far, has been the formation of national committees on reparations in individual European, Caribbean and African countries. They believe this strategy may eventually pay off by mobilising mass black support.

However, many black Britons are divided over the issue of reparations. Some have dismissed the compensation issue as a non-starter and waste of time.

This does not worry front runners of the campaign.

Says Wilmont: "Many blacks have been divided by whites, for a long time, so that they could be manipulated easily. And there are blacks who are benefiting from collaboration with the slave masters and you think these blacks want to hear about reparations?"

SHEPHERD MUTAMBA is a Zimbabwean journalist.

BLACKS in Britain are pushing hard for compensation for slavery from Europe and the Americas — more than a century after the end of the slave trade.

"We are not crazy when we demand compensation for slavery that took place in the 19th century," Patrick Wilmont, a member of the Africa Reparations Movement (UK) told Gemini News Service.

"Some people say Oh, well, it was a long time ago — slavery was abolished 150 something years ago and we really should live and forget that old nonsense," says Bernie Grant, a British MP and strong advocate for reparations.

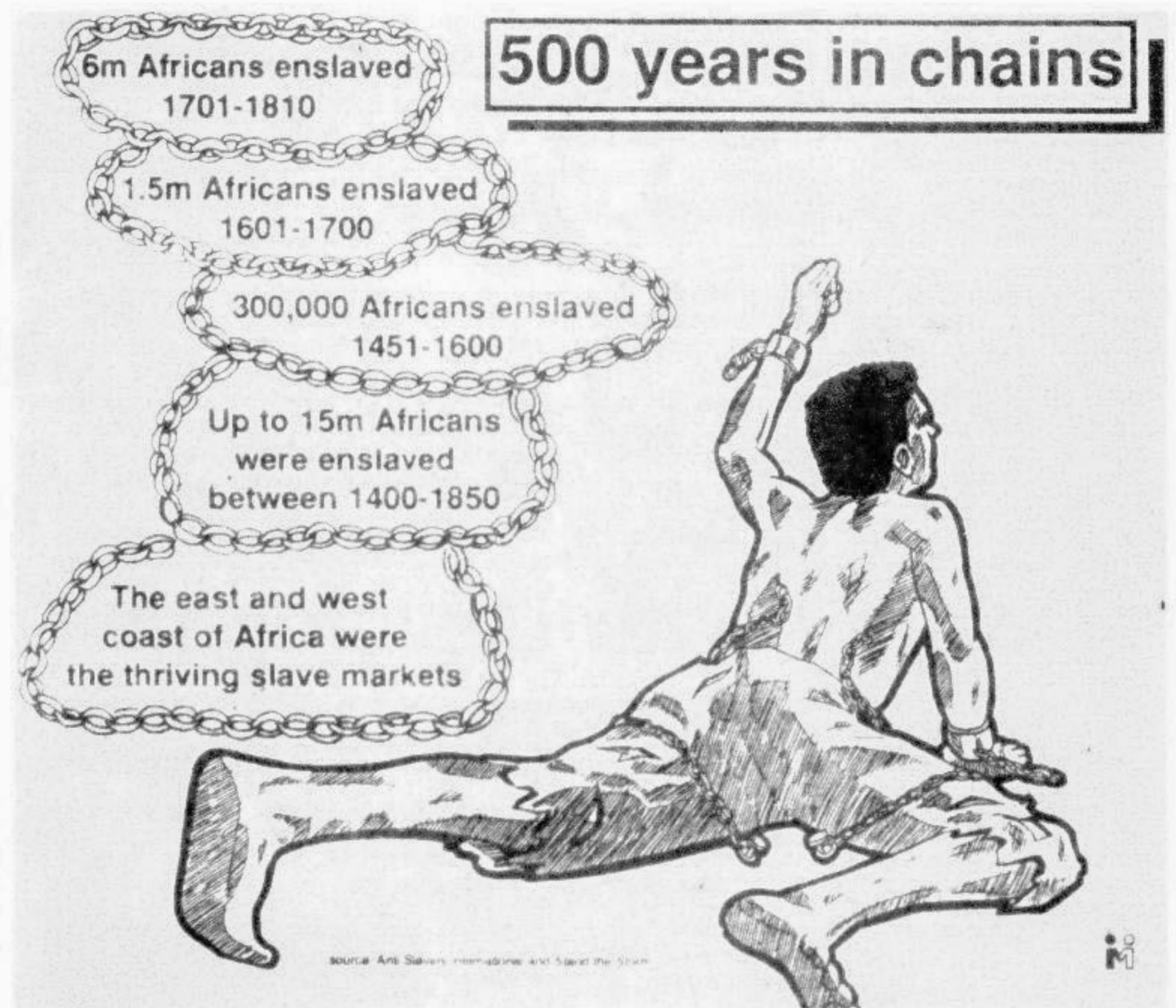
A report by the Movement argues "We can't evaluate the price of hundreds of thousands of lives that were lost, dehumanisation during slavery. We are asking for an acknowledgement by those enriched from slavery and colonialism — a confession for their complicity in an apology. And the natural consequence of all these include monetary compensation."

A sub-committee which was appointed after the first International Conference on Reparations in Nigeria in 1990, has tasked the Organisation of African Unity-backed Group of Eminent Persons on Reparations to work out how the reparations should be made.

Claims of racism against blacks are increasing in Britain. As a result, the movement is also demanding improvements in race relations and equal employment opportunities for blacks.

And as part of the reparations they are calling for the cancellation of Third World debt. According to the World Bank developing countries have a total debt of more than \$1,945 billion.

Says Grant: "The fact of the matter is that we don't owe them anything. They owe us."



there is no international law that limits claims for murder and genocide, such as was involved in slavery.

They also claim that their demands are legal. "There is a principle in law known as unjust enrichment," says the group. "If one party becomes enriched as a result of a wrong done to another party, the law compels the former to make an adjustment to the latter."

The reparation movement in Britain bases its demand for compensation on several examples.

pamphlets: "Six million Jews were killed in the holocaust in Germany. They get reparations. Germany writes out a cheque every year as reparations for what they did to Jewish people during the war."

According to the German Information Centre in New York the government has paid more than \$95 billion to the Jews since the end of the war. Individuals in Israel have been paid \$26 billion of that amount directly.

Grant cites more examples: British Prime Minister

John Major's visit to Japan in 1993 to ask for reparations to Britain's prisoners of war.

Japan's recent agreement to compensate Korean women who were systematically raped as so-called 'comfort women' during the Second World War.

Russia's apology to Japan for taking some of the Japanese islands during the Second World War.

Aborigines demand an apology from the Australian government for grabbing their land.

Native people in Canada and the United States de-

The movement argues that