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UGANDAN ASIANS, BRITAIN, INDIA AND THE COMMONWEALTH

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WITHOUT MINIMIZING the magnitude of the Asian tragedy in Uganda, one can still say that the mass expulsion of aliens or non-citizens is not an uncommon phenomenon in Africa nor, one can safely assert, is it limited to one particular people or community. Preceding Amin, other African governments—either democratic or military-autocratic, as one chooses to categorize them—had ejected non-citizens under the policy of what has come to be euphemistically called ‘localization’. In December 1969, several thousand Nigerians were expelled by the Busia régime in Ghana; some time later, Ghanaian immigrants were thrown out of Sierra Leone and Liberia, and, more recently, General Mobutu ordered out of Zaïre some 6,000 non-citizen Africans who had married locally and become, for all practical purposes, a settled part of the indigenous population.

Also, in recent years, there has been a phenomenal increase in the number of refugees who have fled their homes in search of shelter and security. In 1972, it was estimated that in Uganda alone there were as many as 60,000 Tutsis from Rwanda and 150,000 refugees from Sudan. Recently some 9,000 Malawians, said to be followers of the Watch Tower movement, fled to Zambia for fear of reprisal from the ruling party. Such stories—all too many—are pouring in from various parts of Africa. In comparison to these unfortunate and homeless people, the Asian refugees from Uganda can be said to have fared much better in the sense that most of them have found alternative homes, jobs and opportunities to restart life in new surroundings. Further, as compared to those hapless Ugandan Africans against whom Amin’s troops seem to have mounted a campaign of extermination, one can say that the Asians experienced very little physical violence during the final phase of exodus. Things could have been much more severe, although the worst excesses of the régime had not become known by then.

Considering the above facts, it is worth enquiring why the Asians in Uganda should have become the ones chosen among the various refugees in Africa to receive world-wide attention. Had it been purely human considerations, there were (and are) others in Africa in worse conditions to merit greater attention.

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1. Justin O’Brien, *Brown Britons: the Crisis of the Ugandan Asians* (Runnymede Trust Publication, London, 1972).

It is also curious that so long as the Asians lived a cloistered life, absorbed in their commercial and community affairs, few cared to take serious notice of them. Occasionally, one came to know about the 'exploitation' of Africans by Asians, and formed hasty judgements about them, but on the whole little attempt was made to investigate the problems, the conditions, or even the exact number of Asians in East Africa. Even after the Immigration Act of 1968, when the cases of Asians trying to force their entry into Britain were found newsworthy, the general tendency was one of playing down the problem—that is, until Amin's famous 90 days decree revolutionized the scene. For generations, during their stay in East Africa, the Asians had come to accept the neglect—and the conspiracy of silence—that the world outside had maintained about them. It was ironical, therefore, that they should make world headlines at a time when their days in East Africa had nearly come to an end.

How do we explain this 'conspiracy of silence'? Partly because of the attitudes which Britain, India and the African countries adopted towards the Asians, each for different reasons: the British because the Asians held British passports, the Indians because they originally migrated from India, and the Africans because they were a migrant community—each attempted to keep a balance between action and inaction, until Amin decided wholly and irretrievably to upset it. Once this happened, a confrontation between the British and the Ugandan governments became unavoidable, resulting in the involvement of the world community at large in the crisis. It may be useful, in studying these dimensions, if we first examine the motives which governed the official attitudes of Britain and India towards the Asians in East Africa; secondly, review the stages of the actual crisis which erupted in August–September 1972; and, thirdly, assess the consequences of the crisis, especially in terms of Britain's relations with the Afro-Asian members of the Commonwealth.

The British attitude

As to the British attitude towards the Asians in East Africa, since a good deal has already been written on the problem, we shall confine ourselves to taking note of a few salient features.

Until the middle 1960s the legal position of British passport holders of Asian origin was seldom debated in Britain. This was partly because questions of immigration and race relations had not become interlinked, partly because there was a general confidence in London that British influence could take care of such post-independent changes as might take place in East Africa. The role of British troops in suppressing the East African mutiny in 1964 strengthened rather than weakened this confidence. However, once the pressure of Africanization began forcing out the Asians, who then began to enter Britain in larger numbers, the situation changed rapidly. Debate in the United Kingdom, as Justin O'Brien writes, became obsessed with the "number game". The immigration of coloured people became the focal point for parties and poli-

ticians to judge the state of race relations in the country. Just as the extreme Conservatives and the Powellites took the higher range of figures to warn about a million 'Browns' invading Britain, so the liberal elements tried to deflate the number so as to assure the British public. In the event, the Labour Government enacted the 1968 Act, which, as Nicholas Deakin wrote at the time, 'provided for the retrospective deprivation of the rights of a group of citizens, in defiance of solemn obligations solemnly made.'²

This is a familiar story. What needs to be restated with emphasis is that, in hurrying through the 1968 legislation, the Labour Government showed a measure of panic which could not be accounted for by any immediate crisis in East Africa. In the event, it represented the government's own reaction and its attempt to appease public opinion at home. Thus, as will be seen, the East African Asians became a double victim of racial tensions, both in the host countries and in the country of ultimate destination. What proved more damaging in the long run, however, was that in passing the legislation the British Government also did not take into account the extreme sensitivity of the African governments on issues concerning race relations and citizenship status in their respective countries. In their view, the Asian non-citizens constituted not only a minority in a plural society but also an identifiable group against whom the African people nursed many grievances. In a sense, anti-Asianism had become an important ingredient of African nationalism. The Immigration Act of 1968, therefore, became a test case for politicians and governments in East Africa to prove, where their national interests were concerned, they would stand no nonsense from Britain. And this could be proved only by squeezing out the Asians! Summarizing the results of the 1968 Act, O'Brien noted:

'Race Relations in East Africa suffered as a result because the occasion vividly demonstrated the Asian sense of insecurity . . . British-East African relations suffered also because it created misgivings in the minds of East African Governments about the credibility of British obligations towards its citizens in East Africa. And it introduced in the UK the new dimension of race in calculations of who should enter Britain. Things were never the same again since the 1968 Act.'³

At the same time the fact that Britain failed to consult its Commonwealth partners, especially India and Pakistan, about the urgency of the new Act helped to give rise to two broad impressions. First, by its unilateral action, Britain made others feel that the repatriation of the Asians was ultimately its own responsibility. (Otherwise, why pass such legislation through Parliament?) Secondly, even if the Act discriminated against a particular set of British citizens, it was to be treated as a domestic matter in which others had no say. The

2. Nicholas Deakin, 'Citizens and Immigrants in Britain', *Round Table*, April 1971.
3. O'Brien, *Brown Britons*.

reaction in India was very sharp. In both press and Parliament the Immigration Act was condemned as 'racist' and 'unfortunate'. As we shall show, the period 1966-68 had marked a perceptible change in India's attitude, when it sincerely made attempts to instil confidence in the East African Asians and bring them into closer association with India through various technical and economic ventures. Such attempts were, however, nullified by the passage of the new Act.

Here it is necessary to take account of the general reaction of the East African Asians to the various twists and turns in British policies. On the whole, the Asians were quite happy to have British passports, which gave them the psychological satisfaction that in times of crisis they could freely enter Britain. As to whether this was the reason for their unwillingness to become East African citizens is a question beyond the scope of this article; but there is no doubt that most Asians treated their passports as an insurance to be used only in some vague and perhaps distant future. It was not until the middle 1960s that there began, as a result of the policy of Africanization, a small-scale exodus of Asians from Africa to Britain, India and Pakistan. Yet there was no panic. In the meantime, certain apprehensions were growing in the minds of the Asians—including the belief that British officials in East Africa and the British settler community were encouraging a degree of anti-Asian feeling among the Africans. This fear can partly be accounted for by the fact that during the pre-independence period white settlers and the Asians, especially in Kenya, were working at cross-purposes, which resulted in considerable misunderstanding between the two communities. After independence a new situation developed. As the writer was told by many Asians: 'The British [actually the settlers] would never forgive us for the resistance we had put up against their schemes in East Africa. Now they are joining hands with the African politicians to drive us out of the country.' These fears were to a large extent exaggerated; but it is also true that both British and European expatriates made no bones about their dislike of the Asians.⁴ The British High Commissions' attitude in Kampala and Nairobi was one of indifference to the Asians, and this became more marked after the 1968 Act, when junior officials accepted or rejected the Asian claim that they were British citizens, with a great deal of callousness. The atmosphere was not one to boost the morale of the Asians. On the contrary, when the writer talked to some British officials in Nairobi in July 1968, one of them went to the length of assuring him that it would be good for all concerned if the Asians were to become stateless and a charge on the international community as a whole!

Whatever may be the ultimate verdict, one can say, on the basis of the preceding discussion, that: (i) a major share of the responsibility for undermining the confidence of the Asians must be borne by the British; (ii) that the passing

4. See Paul Theroux, 'Hating the Asians', *Transition*, (Kampala) October/November 1967.

of the 1968 Act drastically cut short the length of their stay in East Africa, since, from being merely non-citizens in East Africa, they now became the centre of a controversy involving the British and African governments; and (iii) the 1968 Act closed the door for a Commonwealth or multi-racial initiative on the problems of Asians, particularly those possessing British passports.

The attitude of the Indian Government

We now turn to the official Indian attitude and its effect on the Asians in East Africa. Perhaps the best way to proceed is to identify, first of all, the factors which worked either for or against a closer association between India and its overseas communities in Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda, and then to relate, in broad outline, how the Asians viewed their relations with their country of origin.

It is very difficult to make any assessment as to which of the different communities among the Asians hold closest to their ties with India. In general, since 70 per cent of the total number of 300,000 Asians in the three territories of Africa are Hindus, it can be assumed that most of them have retained *some* ties with India through occasional visits, marriage, religious or caste organizations. But this does not mean that the remaining 30 per cent, or some 78,000 Muslims belonging to Khoja-Isma'ili, Ithnashari and Bohra sects, have severed their connections with India or that, because of their religious faith, they have become more attached to Pakistan. The situation is much more complex: each year a large number of Muslims visit India either for religious reasons (especially the Bohras, who have their religious head in Bombay) or to meet relatives in their ancestral homes. On the whole, the division of the sub-continent into India and Pakistan has not brought about any major change in the relations between Hindu and Muslim communities; yet, just as a riot in India causes communal passions to flare up, so armed conflict or war between India and Pakistan adversely affects community relations in East Africa. The Hindus go about raising funds for the defence of India, and the Muslims help Pakistan missions to spread anti-India propaganda. Such effusions of religious or nationalist fervour must surely have made Africans wonder if the Asians would ever become integrated with their own (African) societies. In addition, there were occasions when an official statement by India or Pakistan unwittingly gave the impression that the Asians retained extraterritorial loyalties. Thus, late in 1963, Nehru was reported as having said to a journalist that Indians overseas had a double loyalty, one to the country of their adoption and the other to India. The report aroused great misgivings in Kenya, both among the Indians and the Africans.⁵

Throughout the early 1960s India's attitude suffered from ambiguity. Thus the Asians were sometimes officially described as 'the guests of the Africans' and at other times they were told that they should expect no special favours

5. *Hindustan Times*, 8 March 1963.

from India.⁶ The association that was built up during the 1920s and 1930s between the Indian nationalist leaders and prominent Asians in East Africa, especially in Kenya, could not be ended abruptly with the passing of the British colonial empire. Yet, with the independence of the East African countries, it also became imperative for India to establish closer links with the new African leaders; and, in so far as the Asians, because of the middle position they hold in African societies, stood in the way of establishing such links, India officially advised them either to integrate with the Africans or to return to India. Indeed, had the Asians not obtained exemption from the 1962 Immigration Act, thus guaranteeing them free entry to Britain, it is possible that a large number of Asians—especially those who declined to take out East African citizenship—might have returned to India. But that is a matter of speculation.

The point that needs to be stressed is that during the initial years after the 'Uhuru' celebrations in East Africa, that is, between about 1960 and 1966, the gulf between India and the Asians began to widen. In part, this was bound to occur as India came to believe that the Asians were more of an obstacle than an asset in its diplomatic relations with Africa. Moreover, certain stereotypes about the Asians, such as that they were 'exploiters', or unprincipled businessmen, or prejudiced socially against the Africans, had become widely current in India. Such impressions did a great deal to create an area of misunderstanding between the overseas Asians and their countrymen at home. Curiously enough, the qualities overseas in favour of the Asians—such as their knowledge of the English language, Westernization, affluence, and the acquisition of skills in commerce and trade—were also those which made public opinion in India more prejudiced against them.

For their part, the Asians did little to inform public opinion in India about the conditions of life and the hardships that a number of them faced in Africa. (It was quite a revelation to the writer when he visited the slum areas in Kampala and Nairobi and found a number of Indian families living in abject poverty.) Secondly, unlike the Indians in Burma or Ceylon, the East African Asians had no lobbies in Delhi or at state level in India to plead, interpret and further their cause. The factor which militated most against their interest, however, was that, technically, they had become UK citizens after 1962—a fact which they quite openly cited as a guarantee of their security in foreign lands.

Other factors also influenced India's stand *vis-à-vis* the East African Asians. By the end of 1962, following India's military reverses at the hands of China, earlier optimism about India's international standing had begun to wane. Partly because of this, and partly because the Chinese unleashed a diplomatic offensive to isolate India from the Afro-Asian camp, India found it necessary to extend effusive support to African nationalism and pan-Africanist goals. The impression that India was indifferent or cool towards anti-colonialist and anti-

6. See Anirudha Gupta, (ed.), *Indians Abroad: Asia and Africa* (New Delhi, 1971).

racist struggles had to be corrected even if it involved at times the rubber-stamping by the Indian Government of African decisions at the UN and at Commonwealth meetings. In view of these broad foreign policy goals, it must have seemed a matter of smaller consequence to India if the Asians were squeezed out of Africa or faced some degree of racial discrimination.

A shift was nevertheless discernible when, by the end of 1966, there was a growing awareness in New Delhi's Ministry of External Affairs that, whatever citizenship the Asians held, they could not be wished away in India's overall relationship with the East African states. The change was due partly to the revolution in Zanzibar which rendered some thousands of Asians stateless, partly because of agitation in India over the summary expulsion of Asians from Kenya and Tanzania,⁷ and partly because the Asians had the requisite capital which, it was hoped, would help initiate India's technical and industrial projects in East Africa. Thus the Government of India began to consider seriously a change in its original stand. It was felt desirable that the Asians, especially in Kenya and Uganda, should be brought within rather than kept out of the broad framework of India's policy-goals in Africa. To this end, India started negotiating with the Kenyan Government to start the Africa-India Development Corporation (Africendo), with Kenyan Asian and Indian capital. The long term objective of the Corporation was 'to seek the integration of the Indian community, numbering about 150,000, in the economic life of Kenya, thus fortifying the foundations of a multi-racial society'.⁸ The initiative flowed from the optimistic hope that, once Africans realized the contributions which the Asians were making to the economic reconstruction of Kenya, the relations between the two races would improve. The success of the scheme, however, depended on a number of imponderables, *viz.* (i) the extent to which Africans were willing to trust the Asians; (ii) the stand Britain would take on matters relating to the citizenship status of the Asians; and (iii) the length the Asians were ready to go to co-operate with India's new plans.

The third aspect needs some elaboration. It had been argued that the presence of Asian traders and businessmen in Africa would help boost the export of India's consumer and manufacturing goods and that the wealthier section of Asians would welcome the flow of Indian public and private capital to start industries in the sectors approved by the African governments. Experience, however, belied these hopes: the Asian *Dukawallah* had not shown much enthusiasm in selling Indian goods when the products of Hong Kong, Japan and Western Europe and China had fetched them larger profits and a more extensive market. Similarly, the prominent Asian firms, such as those of Madhvani and Mehta, viewed India's entry into the industrial field more as

7. In 1966, eight Asians were expelled by the Kenyan Government and put on a plane bound for India. As none of them happened to be Indian citizens, the Government of India took serious notice of such an 'unfriendly act'.

8. *AICC Economic Review*, October 1966.

unfair competition than as a gesture of unselfish co-operation. The representatives of both these groups felt that India's schemes for joint industrial ventures would undercut their own position in East Africa.

Thus, as promoters of Indian exports, or as business and industrial partners, the Asian community proved of little use to India. Yet, viable and—in the long run—advantageous relationship might possibly have developed had not the pressure of 'Africanization' and the new British Immigration Act unsettled the Asians. By 1968, it had become plain that the real issue was not one of reassuring the Asian about his place or *role* in African society, but of finding the best means to make good his escape from Africa, along with his family and savings. India was thus forced to abandon its plans. Instead, fearing an exodus from Kenya, the Government of India imposed visa regulations on all categories of Asians in June 1968. Later, the Government of India entered into an arrangement by which the Asians were allowed to come to India, provided the British High Commission in Nairobi endorsed their passports, guaranteeing them right of entry to the UK.⁹

The Kenyan crisis of 1968 helped to underscore three important lessons for India. In the first place, India learnt that African governments were not amenable to any outside persuasion or intercession on behalf of the non-citizen Asians.¹⁰ Instead, they were more likely to see such attempts as undue 'interference' in their internal affairs. Secondly, any responsibility to 'take back' the British-Asian citizens rested solely on Britain, especially since the UK government had not thought it necessary to consult a fellow Commonwealth government about the enactment of the new law. Thirdly, the historical limitations within which the Asians functioned, with all their inconsistencies and frustrations, were now clear to India. As an Indian diplomat described the situation: 'The story of the Asians in East Africa closely resembles a Greek tragedy of which the dénouement is well known.' Pressed by circumstances and fate, the Asians had become a victim of racist feelings in Britain and Africa: as such, they deserved some humanitarian consideration from the original parent country.

The above description may persuade one to believe that there was a general appreciation of India's motives and attitudes among the Asian community. On the contrary, they were subjected to as much questioning and criticism as were those of Britain—though on very different grounds. Some of the important complaints brought against India were as follows: first, the Indian government and its missions in the African capitals had seldom cared to look into and understand their problems; second, by counselling them to 'integrate' with the Africans, India had—albeit unwittingly—encouraged the Africans to increase

9. Under the arrangement India allowed some 2,500 Indian-British citizens temporary residence on humanitarian grounds.

10. In early 1968, India's Minister of State for External Affairs, Mr B. R. Bhagat, flew to Kenya to meet President Kenyatta, with a personal message from Mrs Gandhi. The Kenyan President, however, did not grant him an audience.

their demands on the Asians (such as marrying their daughters to the Africans); third, India had failed to follow a hard line with the African governments to protect their lives and property.

All these complaints have a certain basis, though it is generally the case with any immigrant community, anxious about its own security, to exaggerate complaints about others. To the extent that India followed the policy of advising Asians to 'integrate' with the local people without specifying what was meant by 'integration', it gave rise to new irritants in African-Asian relations. The Africans quoted the remarks of visiting Indian leaders to East Africa to substantiate their charge that Asians were not integrating with them, and such pronouncements heightened the feeling of insecurity and isolation among the Asians. As regards the specific problems of the Asians, it may be true that some Indian officials adopted an unhelpful attitude. Nevertheless, among the important responsibilities with which Indian diplomats were charged, one was to serve and promote the interests and welfare of the people of Indian origin in Africa. Whether India could have chosen a tougher line with the post-independent African governments was an issue which was not as simple as the Asians believed. In the first place, India lacked any sanctions to reinforce such a posture; secondly, India might well have been accused of 'imperialism' or of bullying the weaker nations; and, finally, there was no surety that such a posture would have proved beneficial to the Asians in the long run. By the middle of the 1960s, it was possible to see that interference by the rulers of Communist China in the internal affairs of the countries of South-East Asia had resulted in violence against the overseas Chinese population. Had India followed a similar course, in all probability the Asians would have suffered a comparable fate in Africa.

The Ugandan Crisis, 1972

Against this background, we may now look more closely at the important stages of the crisis leading to the expulsion of 40,000 Asians from Uganda. These stages are easily discernible: between 8 August (when Amin declared his 'war of liberation' on the Asians) and 23 August the British Government vacillated between pleading and making threats to Amin to rescind his expulsion order. It was not until the failure of Geoffrey Rippon's mission to Uganda that the British Government publicly accepted its responsibility towards the British Asians. On 23 August the Uganda Resettlement Board was constituted and plans were set afoot to arrange for the airlift of Asians. Between 23 August and 27 September the British Government launched a massive diplomatic offensive to obtain help and assistance from the international community in the hope of resettling the Asians. In a television broadcast on 31 August, Foreign Secretary Sir Alec Douglas-Home said: 'This is a human problem and we are entitled to ask for help from the Commonwealth and foreign countries, and from the international community.'¹¹

11. *Africa Diary*, 23-29 September 1972.

Towards the close of September it appeared as if Britain was heading for an open clash with Uganda in the UN General Assembly. On 27 September Douglas-Home addressed the General Assembly in these words: 'Injustice has to be condemned wherever it raises its ugly head, whether it is perpetrated by Europeans or Africans or Asians or whoever.'¹² Had Britain pressed for a debate at this stage the two alternative courses it might have chosen were: (i) to call for an international effort to rehabilitate the Asians; (ii) to ask the UN to apply mandatory sanctions against the régime of Amin. In the event, it opted for neither although it had by then become apparent that the African leaders, particularly General Mobutu, who had interceded on Britain's behalf to persuade Amin to extend the 90 days period, had failed in their mission. Amin remained as adamant as ever and declared that neither the OAU nor the Commonwealth could force him to change his mind. Ultimately he won. The Asians were air-lifted—some 23,000 came to Britain, about 5,000 allowed temporary residence in India, and the rest were flown to Canada, Australia, Malawi, and various countries of Europe. By 8 November all British Asians had left Uganda.

It is important that we keep in mind these stages in order to understand the varying manner in which the world community responded to Britain's call for help during the crisis. So long as Britain used threats or persuasion without directly admitting its responsibility towards its Asian citizens, the problem was considered to be essentially a bilateral one to be sorted out between Britain and Uganda. Indeed, the one factor that came into prominence at this time was that neither Uganda nor Britain was following, or willing to follow, an acceptable code of behaviour towards a particular group of people. India's first reaction was that, although it sympathized with the plight of the Asians, it could not allow its territory to be made a 'dumping ground' for the fleeing refugees. On August 11 it imposed the visa system to prevent the entry into India 'in haste and panic' of a large number of British passport holders. Announcing this in Parliament, the Deputy Minister for External Affairs said: 'The government is not oblivious of the fact that many of the affected persons have social, cultural and traditional links with India; the visa system will make adequate provision for these requirements.'¹³ The step was taken on the ground that if India failed to act with firmness there would be a groundswell of refugees coming to India from other parts of Africa. It was given out that altogether 3,400,000 people of Indian origin were living in ten African countries.

At this point, however, two important developments took place. The British Government publicly made it known that they would accept the expelled Asians. Mr Rippon, on his return from Uganda, declared: 'We, for our part, in the UK will bear our share of the responsibility and we ask other people to do the same in a calm and sensible and orderly manner.'¹⁴ Judged by domestic reactions

12. *Ibid.*, 14–20 October 1972.

13. *Indian Express* (Delhi), 12 August 1972.

14. *Africa Diary*, 23–29 September 1972.

in Britain, especially in view of the campaign launched by the Monday Club and other extremist organizations to keep the Asians out, this was indeed a very bold and principled stand by the Government. Such a decision also showed that, in moments of crisis, when stakes involving moral and humanitarian issues are high, an essentially democratic system is apt to prove its superiority to an irresponsible military autocratic régime—an aspect doubly confirmed when Amin ordered that all Asians, whether citizens or non-citizens, should leave the country. This was the second development. Amin's paranoic hatred of an entire people shocked not only Asian and European leaders but also a number of African governments. For the first time one witnessed Asian, African and European members of the Commonwealth joining ranks to condemn an African government. This was something unheard of in the history of the Commonwealth. During the entire decade beginning with 1960, all that one had known was a concerted attack on Britain launched by the coloured members of the Commonwealth. Now there was a very different reaction: the governments of Tanzania, Zambia and Mauritius condemned in no uncertain terms Amin's racialism; India and Canada assured Britain that they would allow a certain number of Asians to settle in their respective countries, and, within a few weeks, other countries of western Europe followed suit. In other words, it did not require Britain to explain its position, for, once it had made clear that it would not shrink its responsibility, Britain won abundant support and sympathy from the world community.

During the month of September, as stories of atrocities against the fleeing Asians began to pour in, it began to appear almost as if Britain and some members of the Commonwealth might actually initiate some sort of collective measure against a blatantly racist régime. This was the direction indicated when the British government threatened to move for a debate on Uganda in the UN. Meanwhile, the Uganda-Tanzania border clash brought about a crisis situation in Africa itself. Fearing a total breakdown of relations with Uganda, President Nyerere appealed to the OAU to intervene, on 19 September. India, on the other hand, was accused by Amin of making plans to invade Uganda. This was refuted, but, for the first time, India officially indicated that it would support any international action which would persuade Amin to extend the time-limit for Asians in Uganda.¹⁵ India's President, V. V. Giri, who was at this time paying an official visit to Ethiopia, Tanzania and Zambia, declared in Lusaka that 'the happenings in Uganda have thrown a heavy cloud of doubt and uncertainty over the minds of many people of Indian origin in several countries in Africa.'¹⁶ He also warned the African leaders that, unless they took care, 'the pernicious doctrine of racialism may permeate even free Africa.' This was altogether a new language—no Indian leader had used such words before in relation to an African country.

15. *Patriot*, 30 September 1972.

16. *Africa Diary*, 4–10 October 1972.

Thus it began to look as if Britain would not be wholly abandoned if it should decide to initiate action against the Ugandan government, either through the UN or the Commonwealth. Yet, as we have noted, it did neither. How should one explain this sudden 'climb-down', if one chooses to put it that way? After all, it could be argued that, had Britain chosen a course of confrontation, certain beneficial results might have followed. It might have divided the African states, while at the same time winning the support of most Asian and White members of the Commonwealth. Secondly, rebutting the argument that Britain followed a 'racist' policy in regard to Rhodesia and South Africa, Africans might have been persuaded to take note of the racialism practised by one of their own leaders in the continent. This was at least the tone of Douglas-Home's speech in the UN General Assembly. Finally, it might have enabled the British Government to postpone or stretch out the evacuation operations until some commitments were made to ensure the safety and the orderly withdrawal of its citizens from Uganda. From the point of view of domestic politics, a direct confrontation might well have enhanced the stature of Mr Heath's leadership in Britain.

Having stated these probable advantages, one needs to ask: 'Why, then, did Britain not choose such a line of action?' The explanation is very likely to be as follows. In spite of their disquiet about the behaviour of Amin, most African states were probably not willing to range themselves against him in the world at large. This is perhaps what India's Minister of External Affairs, Swaran Singh, found when he took 'an unusually soft stand' in the UN. But the attitude of Whitehall and New Delhi was very likely governed by another and very prudent consideration. This was explained by an Indian newspaper in the following words: '. . . there is nothing to be gained by using strong words if they cannot be backed by meaningful action in Uganda and any show of strong sentiments may trigger off an anti-Asian wave.'¹⁷

In the end, therefore, it was in the interests of the welfare and safety of those affected that both Britain and India chose to avoid any direct confrontation with Amin—a moral consideration reinforced by the practical understanding that, in the present stage of international relations, there is no way of bringing to reason the rulers of a sovereign state if they choose to defy all recognized concepts of international morality. One can also argue that Britain's diplomatic efforts were not entirely unsuccessful. Apart from gaining some degree of sympathy and respect from the world at large, it received valuable assistance from other nations to resettle the Asian refugees.

Conclusion

We can therefore summarize the main results of the Uganda crisis in so far as they affected Britain, India, and the Commonwealth. On its part, as we have noticed, Britain found out that the vindication of a moral principle could fetch

17. *Times of India* (Delhi), 6 October 1972.

dividends in terms of goodwill and support from the world community. Secondly, to the extent that Amin's anti-Asian campaign exhibited a new type of 'racialism', it is difficult to see how the African members of the Commonwealth can now attack Britain as being 'racist' without also condemning the racism practised by Amin. Of course, this does not mean that British policies in Rhodesia or South Africa will not be criticized at future gatherings of Commonwealth Prime Ministers: but it may be that such criticisms will be made on a more objective basis.

As far as Indo-British relations are concerned, they have indeed benefited a great deal in the recent period. Britain's readiness to accept its responsibility towards the overseas Asians holding British passports has made a tremendous impression on India, and has helped to dispel some of the misunderstanding which clouded Indo-British relations since the passing of the 1968 Act.

From India's point of view, the crisis came as an eye-opener in the sense that India was obliged at last to recognize that the leadership and political systems of the African states could vary considerably from country to country, and therefore that its support for the principles of 'Afro-Asian solidarity' did not mean that it must condone all the lapses and errors of all African governments. Such a realization may help India to evolve a more realistic policy towards Africa, according to its immediate national interests. In addition, like Britain, India has begun to accept some responsibility for its overseas children, and has called for a more co-ordinated approach to help resolve their problems.

Finally, it was because Britain chose not to make its quarrel with Uganda a direct issue of confrontation within the Commonwealth that the organization may, paradoxically, be given a new lease of life. In the past, the Commonwealth was seen as an organization dedicated to making the good better; it may now be seen perhaps as having to make the worst not quite so bad—as indeed happened over Uganda.