

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

JCB-23
The Peace Corps in Nyasaland

July 16, 1963
3 Richmond Close, Highlands
Salisbury, Southern Rhodesia

Mr. Richard Nolte
Institute of Current World Affairs
366 Madison Avenue
New York 17, New York

Dear Mr. Nolte:

A few years ago an American was a rare sight in Nyasaland, the little Central African country of lakes and mountains. Today he is seen and welcomed everywhere.

One of the reasons for this is financial. The country will soon gain independence from Britain but in order to be independent economically as well as politically it needs outside investment. At present it leans heavily on Britain; it couldn't survive financially without her support. Last year 25% of the budget was paid by Britain and in the next six months British taxpayers will pay 35% of Nyasaland's expenditures. While African leaders appreciate this aid it galls them that they have to lean so heavily on a country from which they would like to be independent in every way. Thus American investment, public and private, is doubly welcomed; because it is so very much needed and because it is not British.

While there is no American private investment as yet, the United States Agency for International Development (AID) has poured considerable money into the country for educational and economic surveys and for building educational and technical institutions. It has recently moved its Central African headquarters from Southern Rhodesia to Nyasaland. This has made a great impression on the Africans. They are very optimistic about their future and they are moved that Americans also have confidence in their country and are willing to back their hopes for success.

American confidence in Nyasaland was further confirmed by the arrival of 42 Peace Corps teachers this year. In mid-January they arrived at Chileka airport, 10 miles from the industrial city of Blantyre, where in the summer rain they were welcomed by Paul Geren, the U.S. Consul-General in Central Africa, Robert Remole, U.S. Consul in Blantyre, Robert Poole, head of the Peace Corps in Nyasaland, and by representatives of the Government and the ruling Malawi Congress Party (MCP).

Not only did the Peace Corps teachers add to American prestige, they added immeasurably to that of Dr. Hastings Banda, the Prime Minister. When he welcomed them the following morning, he used

the occasion to emphasize to his followers that it was because of his contacts that he could bring outside help to the country. He said that when he last visited the United States President Kennedy had said, "'Dr. Banda, any time you have anything on your mind, do not hesitate to write to me'. Thus I wrote him, taking him at his word, and asked for help with teachers."

Dr. Kanyama Chiume, Minister of Education and Social Development, reassured the teachers that the members of the Malawi Congress Party (in effect, the Government) did not hate White people but only the "domination of Africans by Whites". He stressed the goodwill between Nyasaland and America and applauded help which would build Nyasaland "not into an atomic power but into a modern state. We want to make a Switzerland, a Scotland or a California in a tropical setting."

Warned about driving on the left side of the road, tropical diseases, staying out of politics; reminded that they were "guests of the Africans" and also "guests of the British officials" and that they were "beautifully visible" representatives of the United States, the Peace Corps volunteers were sent out into the bush and into the towns for the beginning of the 1963 school term.

Some of the European population have not taken to them or to Americans generally. They damn our interference in what they consider to be their affairs. They have labelled our Consul and USIS man "White Kaffirs" and like to explain that our Resident Consul, who has been transferred to Mali, is leaving because he was too pro-African. They have spread various stories that the Peace Corps will be sent home, totally or in part, because either the girls have become pregnant by African men, or American men have impregnated African girls. They criticize Peace Corps volunteers for being either too friendly or not friendly enough with the Africans and either too friendly or not friendly enough with the Europeans.

But among Africans I found great admiration for Peace Corps teachers. Even those who are anti-European say they do not include Americans in that category. "You people respect us. The British have been here for over 70 years but they have never tried to know us, to be one with us. Your people do. You live among us, eat our food and work with us. You show us you respect us." An Indian told me he was tiger-fishing recently when he came upon a dark-skinned young man "in colour not much different from us" in shorts, also trying to catch a fish. "We didn't know who he was until he shouted that characteristically American greeting, 'Hi!' Think of it. Here was a man from Minnesota who had come all the way across the world to be with us, to help us - and to go fishing, just like us. We love you Americans!"

Some younger Africans admire the Peace Corps people because they are "cool". They are experts on the twist.

There are 19 men, 11 women and 6 married couples in the Nyasaland group. One of the couples actually met during their training period and were married just before coming. They were among those who, prepared for somewhat primitive living, were disappointed to find that their living quarters, the same as those of other teachers, were quite modern and pleasant. However, some of their fellow teachers who do not live in urban centers, as they do, find their living conditions a bit more up to what they expected.

Whether twisting, teaching or fishing, they seem to be well trained for what they are doing. Briefing at Syracuse University on history, traditions, the educational system and the country's major language, Chinyanja, plus an eleven day course in Nyasaland, have stood them in good stead in their everyday jobs. The members with whom I talked felt that these sessions had adequately covered the problems they were meeting. The only trouble was, they added, no matter how many times they had been told beforehand, many things just didn't mean much until they had seen them for themselves.

Educational opportunities have been extremely limited for the African and the emphasis has been on making him literate in his own language. Only as he advanced to the higher grades did English become first a subject and then the medium of instruction. The Africans, adjusting to a new language, found it easier to memorize their lessons and the answers to questions. Under such circumstances education has offered few opportunities for opening the mind and a diploma has come to mean little more than a passport to a better job. The Peace Corps teachers understood that the limited knowledge of English would be a great handicap but the difficulty, even among those who know English, in working out problems requiring thought rather than memorization, has been discouraging. And, while they realized that some of the students would be lacking in the general education necessary for secondary school courses, they were surprised at the low standards in primary schools where often the teachers themselves have little more than an eighth grade education. They have worked hard on these problems, teaching not only in the secondary schools but in teacher training centers as well.

Secondary schools are so scarce that there are not enough classes for all students who want to continue. Only the cream of the crop is selected for further education and this selection for many students is a great achievement. Once selected, however, they are not usually dropped because of scholastic achievement until the end of the four year course when they take their Matriculation Examinations. Because of this many of them cease to make any effort once they have been accepted. This has particularly disappointed some of the teachers

since they had been told of the students' keenness, industriousness and eagerness to learn and had counted on this to off-set some of the difficulties in language and background.

Some have also found it difficult to teach students whose conception of everything is coloured by a reflection of what their political leaders have said. They think of Dr. Banda as a God and their allegiance is to the Malawi Congress Party which they consider to be synonymous with their country. It is a ticklish business to teach something like history when every statement may be taken as a slight against them or their country.

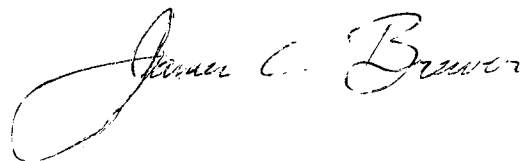
The Peace Corps teachers seem to have avoided this pitfall so far and feel they have made a little progress even though they have only been working for a few months. It is a strain, however, to do a difficult job with super-sensitive strangers. They often live far from each other and within communities where there are few people with similar interests. There are vehicles available for the group to use for business but individually they walk or cycle. During school holidays they gather for "refresher" courses and they are occasionally visited by a member of the Peace Corps administrative staff, both of which help to stave off the feelings of loneliness and boredom which seemed to me to be their greatest adversary. It takes real maturity to keep perspective in such circumstances.

To the people of Nyasaland they represent ideas that are new, stimulating and exciting. In the eyes of the African they are the best thing that has happened to Nyasaland for a long time. Dr. Banda has requested another 60 teachers and in the States applicants are now being screened to join those already here for the start of the school year in January, 1964. By sheer numbers the 102 Peace Corps teachers are bound to make an even greater impact on tiny Nyasaland.

As more and more Americans arrive, however, the novelty is bound to wear off. Right now Americans can do no wrong but the bubble must burst. Race here takes precedence over every other consideration. They are truly grateful for our aid but their leaders are so sensitive about their ability to rule that it will become increasingly difficult to "tiptoe through the hot potatoes" of Nyasaland politics.

It is impossible to suppose that, no matter how well trained and highly qualified, every American in Nyasaland will be so expert in human relations that he will always be able to steer a course acceptable both to the Nyasaland Government and his own concerns.

Sincerely yours,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "James C. Brewer". The signature is written in dark ink and is positioned below the typed name "James C. Brewer".