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LETTER FROM THE PRESIDENT

The Mecca Agreement - pax fiat!

Last month, on 10 January, the Palestinian Centre for Human Rights (PCHR) issued a statement in which it "strongly condemn(ed) bloody incidents in the Occupied Palestinian Territories, which are part of the state of security chaos and misuse of weapons". It went on to say that it:

"Calls upon all parties to resort to dialogue and abstain from using violence and weapons in internal differences;

"Calls for ending all aspects of militarisation in the streets and residential areas and allowing the civil police to assume their duties to keep security and order;

"Calls for the establishment of a judicial investigations committee to investigate all incidents and take appropriate legal measures against all those engaged in them whatever their affiliations are;

"Calls upon all nationalist and Islamist parties to make efforts to end tension between the Hamas and Fatah movements, and ensure bringing them back to dialogues; and,

"Calls upon the Palestinian National Authority to reform and restructure its security services on professional foundations, to unify them under one central command to serve as a law enforcement force that has the duty to protect the safety and security of people, and to ensure that (it) will never be politicised or engage in any conflicts."

About a month after the PCHR issued this statement, on 6-8 February 2007, Fatah and Hamas met in Mecca, Saudi Arabia, "to hold a dialogue on Palestinian conciliation, based on the initiative put forth by Saudi King Abdullah and under his sponsorship."

address at a joint sitting of Parliament last week, on 8 February, the international television network, BBC World, broadcast a documentary claiming to be a report on crime in South Africa. Its result, if not its intention, was to perpetuate the notion that Johannesburg, and South Africa, is "the crime capital of the world".

We have no doubt that this broadcast represented a deliberate attempt by BBC World to insert itself as a player in the determination of our future as a people. Thus BBC World was determined to ensure that what it had resolved to say about our country, it said at a moment that would make the maximum impact on our country's national consciousness and agenda. Fully understanding the importance of the State of the Nation address, it decided that it would broadcast the programme we are discussing on the very eve of this address, and not a day later or earlier.

In the broadcast BBC World said that many of the high rise buildings in central Johannesburg are empty because of the high incidence of crime. It said absolutely nothing about the fact that some of the very same high rise buildings it showed are fully occupied, such as the circular Ponte residential building it prominently highlighted in its visuals.

It also said absolutely nothing about the fact that the headquarters of some of our biggest companies are in central Johannesburg. These include Standard Bank, ABSA (Barclays), First National Bank, Transnet, Anglo American, 'The Star' newspaper, the Chamber of Mines, the Constitutional Court, the Johannesburg Metropolitan Council, the Gauteng Provincial Legislature and government, and the globally-known rugby stadium, Ellis Park.

It also said nothing about the fact that the headquarters of our country's ruling party, the ANC, as well as such important national organisations as the South African Council of Churches (SACC), the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU), and the Black Lawyers Chambers - which will soon host the biggest Law Library in our country - are all in central Johannesburg.

It said nothing about the fact that real estate investors have indeed been showing a very healthy appetite for the same buildings in central Johannesburg which it said nobody wants to occupy because of crime. It said nothing about the fact that at least since 1999 the vacancy rates in the highest grade buildings have been falling significantly and continuously, even reaching the same low levels as similar buildings in important commercial areas of Johannesburg, such as Sandton, that, correctly, are seen as areas unaffected by the crime rates that affect the central districts of many cities in the world.

It said absolutely nothing about the exciting process of urban renewal that is taking place in central Johannesburg, which includes the continuing development of the Newtown precinct, the biggest and most vibrant cultural quarter in South Africa; new housing settlements such as Brickfields; and the conversion of a number of central Johannesburg buildings into top market, highly priced residential apartments. These apartments are now difficult to obtain, at any price, because of high demand.

It said absolutely nothing about the process extensively reported and analysed by urban sociologists, of the decay of city centres in many countries of the world. In the case of Johannesburg, it said absolutely nothing about the impact that the process of the deracialisation of

residential areas in our country, which began in the 1980s, had on central Johannesburg.

Among other things this process of racial integration increased the levels of insecurity among white South Africans, leading to their emigration to other areas of the city, away from central Johannesburg which apartheid had reserved as a white area.

This same phenomenon, of the changing face of city centres, has been observed elsewhere in the world, for instance, in some US cities. We do not know whether BBC World sent its most senior reporters to the US to report on this phenomenon. It might very well have done this. We would be interested to know whether it reported the inevitable consequence of abandoned buildings, which the new and poorer resident communities would not have the money to buy or lease, but would occupy illegally sometimes, instead of glibly accounting for the lack of paying tenants in such buildings by alleging a high incidence of crime.

To show its global viewing audience, almost all of whom do not know South Africa, that it had spoken to the local population, BBC World went to Hillbrow to talk to the residents in what is in many respects a unique area of the city of Johannesburg. If it was interested to report objectively and honestly about crime in our country, and even merely Johannesburg, BBC World would have known that Hillbrow, like some areas of London, has a particular socio-economic profile that is not characteristic of either Johannesburg or South Africa as a whole.

Most significantly, it did not indicate that it had visited by far the largest black area of Johannesburg - Soweto. This was for the obvious reason that any objective report on the incidence of crime in Soweto would show that the crime rate in this area had dropped markedly during the years of democracy. Any objective and honest report would also show that the historically white areas of Johannesburg, though also exposed to crime, for obvious reasons that any criminologist would explain, generally have a much lower incidence of crime than even the least affected historically black areas.

If it decided to do a documentary on crime in the United Kingdom, our own public broadcaster, the SABC, the equivalent of the BBC, would have absolutely no difficulty in focusing on particular areas of London, such as Brixton, to communicate the message that the UK is sinking under the weight of crime. This would be as much a dishonest representation of the incidence of crime in the UK, and even Brixton, as was the BBC World report about the incidence of crime in our country.

BBC World made the assertion that allegations have been levelled against our national police commissioner, that he is associated with "the mafia". It said that nevertheless, presumably because it believes that our government is also part of the criminal project, the National Commissioner had not been removed from his position. This conveyed a message of a BBC World that is convinced of the complicity of our government with the most notorious international criminal syndicates.

It also conveyed the clear statement that BBC World believed the "mafia" allegations it said had been made, which, incidentally, we heard for the first time from BBC World, obviously proceeding from the position that,

necessarily, they must be presumed to represent the truth. What BBC World wants is that our government should sack our National Commissioner of Police to prove the case it set out to make from the beginning, that our governance system is criminally rotten from top to bottom.

BBC World also made the revealing observation that strangely - strange in its view - violent crime in our country did not represent attacks of the black majority against the white minority. This unequivocally confirmed that BBC World does not understand the universal and social phenomenon of crime, does not understand South Africa, and had, like the most die-hard racists in our country, convinced itself that crime in our country represents little more than black vengeance against the former white oppressors.

If we entertained any illusions, BBC World communicated a message that should bring us back to the real world, that there are powerful people elsewhere in the world who are convinced that all of us, principally the black people and their leaders, have dishonestly communicated the message that we are truly committed to the objective of national reconciliation and the creation of a South Africa which belongs to all who live in it, black and white.

Shortly before this documentary was shot and broadcast, we received persistent requests from the BBC representatives in our country to make available ANC leaders to be interviewed for the intended "report on South Africa". We explained to these representatives that this would be difficult as some of these leaders were deeply involved in preparations for the important national funeral of the late Adelaide Tambo; others in the preparation of the State of the Nation Address; that others were in Cape Town to prepare for the opening of parliament; and yet others were out of the country.

In its broadcast BBC World made it a point to mention that neither the Ministry of Safety and Security nor the police service agreed to be interviewed. Again demonstrating its wilful resolve to be economic with the truth, it said absolutely nothing about the fact that it approached us very late, asking us to provide it with interviewees at very short notice.

It said nothing about the objective difficulties we had conveyed to its locally-based representatives, even though it had every possibility to establish independently, without relying on information conveyed to its representatives by our movement, as to whether we had told the truth about the possibility to facilitate its access to the category of ANC leaders it sought to interview.

Having made its own assessment, BBC World could have told the world that the ANC lied when it told them that the people it sought would be difficult to secure, if indeed this was the case. However, in keeping with its not so hidden agenda, it chose to communicate the tendentious message that, despite its attempts, ANC or government representatives had refused to be interviewed.

We must assume that the last minute push to oblige us to provide ANC leaders to be interviewed for the BBC World broadcast derived from a realisation that the BBC had, at least, to demonstrate some respect for one of the most basic ethical principles of journalism, namely, the need to report all perspectives relevant to any story. However, supposedly by chance, and

interestingly, it so happened that the programming imperatives of the British public broadcaster, the BBC, which, obviously, must take precedence over our own as a movement and government, would in fact create the situation such that it would be difficult for the ANC and our government to participate in the BBC World documentary as interviewees, as was ultimately confirmed in practice.

(Incidentally, again consistent with the seeming determination at all times to be economic with the truth, the BBC representatives never explained to us that the "report on South Africa", "which will contain high-quality visuals", was in fact a "report on crime in South Africa". We discovered this only when we saw the broadcast, which BBC World made a point of advertising very vigorously on 8 February.)

Unlike our country, many other countries do not publish crime statistics. Where some do this, Interpol has determined that some of these statistics are entirely false and unreliable. We will continue to insist that our government and criminal justice system should publish accurate and timely information about the incidence of crime in our country.

In part this is to ensure that the entirety of our population is empowered to participate in the fight against crime in a manner that responds to our actual reality, rather than the observations made by reporters who fly into our country from elsewhere in the world, and after spending a few days talking to whoever they select, prepare reports that are broadcast or printed as authoritative accounts of the incidence and nature of crime in our country.

We will continue to insist that our government provides our people with crime statistics because our movement has always recognised the fact that crime reduction and eradication is one of our principal strategic challenges. We needed nobody, including BBC World, to teach us this.

The simple reason for this is that, for centuries, the masses we have represented for 95 years have for all these years and longer, carried by far the heaviest burden of crime in our country. We need nobody to instruct us about the critical importance of defeating crime if we are to succeed to create the new South Africa for which we fought, unaided by many in our country and elsewhere who today pose as the greatest champions of the noble cause of the safety and security of the people of South Africa.

We must accept that our transparency in this regard will encourage even those who claim to know the world to use the information we publish to focus on our country as a special case worthy of special broadcasts. The reality, however, is that the incidence of crime in our country, as in the UK and other countries, is influenced by various historical and contemporary realities.

Any honest report about any country in this regard must necessarily take these realities into consideration. Respect for the most elementary professional ethics demands this of all journalists. However, in our case as an African country, we must accept that we will continue to be faced with the reality that we will, for a very long time, remain victim to the entrenched Afro-pessimism born of centuries of contempt for Africans, which legitimises the most insulting anti-African prejudices as a perfectly acceptable part of the mindset that should inform all understanding and

interpretation of Africa and Africans.

We know this from our experience that the more we succeed to overcome our challenges and create the new non-racial, non-sexist, peaceful and prosperous South Africa to which the majority of our people, black and white, aspire, the harder will some try to show that we are failing, as the negative stereotype of everything African prescribes that, inevitably, Africans will fail.

This serves as an affirming and comfortable device to reassure those who feel superior to us, the Africans, that they are indeed superior. Whatever might be happening in their own countries, such as the serious problem of crime in the UK, this enables them to comfort themselves that their own national situations are not so bad after all.

In this paradigm, the 'We', which has all the means and possibilities to define both itself and the 'Other', will forever convey an image of the ugly 'Other'. This would prove, permanently, that 'We' are beautiful after all, whatever our defects. In our case, it is clear that the more we achieve new successes in building a new South Africa, the more desperate will the 'We' feel that they are becoming indistinguishable from the 'Other'.

Necessarily, the more we, the 'Other', succeeds, the more the 'We' will feel obliged to demonstrate that we have failed, and thus broadcast the kind of documentary shown by BBC World on 8 February.

Our own reality, however, dictates that we must continue to respond to the obligation to focus on the task to restore our country to normality, having overcome centuries of white minority domination, which included a long period of British colonialism, which contributed most significantly to the problem of crime that the historical victims of crime now have to solve, regardless of whatever BBC World might choose to say.

The ANC knows that the hard work our government and people have done to confront the scourge of crime - as well as other important challenges such as the pervasive black poverty that was deliberately engineered during the long period of white minority domination, including white British rule - will continue and succeed.

Contrary to what BBC World sought to communicate, the 2010 FIFA Soccer World Cup will be held in conditions of safety and security for all the teams and the soccer fans who will descend on our country and stadia from all corners of the globe.

This has been the experience of everybody who visited our country to participate in such events as the cricket and rugby world cups, the Africa Athletic and Soccer Cup of Nations tournaments, and the IAAF competition. Similarly, our country has hosted major UN, African Union, Non-Aligned Movement and Commonwealth conferences, with the same result in terms of safety and security.

In addition, our cities, including Johannesburg, very regularly host private and sectoral international conferences whose participants have never experienced any pervasive incidence of crime.

Just over three years from now, and as millions of foreign tourists have

done over the thirteen years of our democracy, the visitors who will attend the FIFA Soccer World Cup tournament will depart our shores puzzled about why supposedly reliable reporters of world affairs, such as BBC World, went out of their way to frighten them that our people are predatory and violent criminals.

The BBC World documentary confirmed that in conditions of war, even when it is conducted without guns, the truth would always be the first casualty. It showed how easily the media can be exploited to use propaganda to create the illusion of reality. It made the statement that until the hunted produce their own historians, so long will their victories be obliterated from the human record by those who abrogate to themselves the right to define themselves as victorious hunters.

Everything we have said communicates the unequivocal message that to avoid unnecessary disappointment and surprise in future, we must teach ourselves to expect that those who hold us in contempt, regardless of what they profess concerning their liberal and progressive credentials, will continue to represent us as violent criminals, or anything else that helps to feed the deeply embedded stereotype that Africans are less than human, or, at least, genetically inferior.

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