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LETTER FROM THE PRESIDENT

Human dignity and a promise made

When we delivered our government's 2006 State of the Nation Address (SONA) on 3 February, during the traditional Joint Sitting of our Houses of Parliament convened to open the session of the National Parliament for the year, we said:

"We expect our Minister of Housing and the leadership of the Financial Institutions to reach final agreement without further delay on the modalities for utilising the R42 billion set aside by the financial institutions for housing development for poor and middle-income groups, thus contributing to the National Effort. This is central to the attainment of a society free of shack settlements, in which all our people enjoy decent housing. In this context, I should also mention that government has decided that we must completely eradicate, in the established settlements, the 'bucket toilets' by the end of 2007."

The poor and previously poor in our society, both black and white, know very well why it was necessary that we mention in the SONA the issue of "bucket toilets", even though this was dealt with only in the single sentence we have just quoted. The brevity in words would not have led these masses to fail to understand the importance of the promise we made, focused on the accomplishment of yet another objective towards the restoration of the human dignity of those who, historically, were oppressed, dispossessed, deprived and marginalised by colonialism and apartheid.

It may be that those among us who, in their lives, never had occasion to use bucket toilets did not, and do not understand the significance of the commitment we made to the nation on 3 February last year, that we would "completely eradicate, in the established settlements, the 'bucket toilets' by the end of 2007". These would have paid little attention to the statement we made ten months ago, because their life experience, as well as their store of knowledge would not have enabled them either to hear what we said,

or understand why such comments had to be made in a SONA.

However, I know that many among today's generations of black people, including some among the very young, know why we made special mention of "bucket toilets". Some among these will know the meaning and origin of such polite phrases as "night soil", used to avoid mention of human faeces.

They will also be familiar with such ethnic and inherently insulting expressions as "umsebenzi wamaBhaca", (the vocational work of the Bhaca people), intended to assure themselves and all concerned that only a tiny minority from within their ranks was involved in the dehumanising work of removing the "night soil", at night.

They will understand the phenomenon of a seeming cultural and stubborn attachment of an entire people to words that seek to avoid direct verbal expression of reality, which suggests an ostrich like instinct to deny the actuality of the truth.

They will understand and persist in the stubbornness inspired by the intimate personal reference that attaches to the issue of "bucket toilets", and therefore its direct and immediate relevance to their deep-seated desire, which is incapable of alienation from any and all human beings, for respect for their human dignity.

Perhaps the most distinguishing and therefore central feature of our struggle for national liberation, liberation from colonialism and apartheid, has been the assertion in principle and in practice, of the human dignity of the black oppressed. All else mattered little, provided that whatever else happened, the end result would be the restoration and respect of our dignity as human beings.

We are about to celebrate the 13th anniversary of our liberation. During this period of freedom, we came to measure what we now celebrate, by referring to jobs created, the numbers with access to social grants, the free houses built, access to free basic services, access to health care, free education, and so on.

Unintentionally, and perhaps subconsciously, again perhaps because no statistical instrument exists to measure this, we have avoided confronting ourselves with the challenge to measure the progress we have made to restore the human dignity of the formerly politically oppressed - the black masses who constitute the overwhelming majority of our people.

At the same time, in its collective memory, our movement has never lost sight of the central imperative to ensure that whatever else our liberation would mean, it had to address the fundamental and critical issue of the restoration and defence of our dignity as Africans.

Having won political power in 1994 and having retained it since then, we have to define for our country and persuade all our people, black and white, to accept the steps we will have to take, that will advance the objective that is impossible to measure in statistical terms.

In scientific terms, the objective to estimate the achievement of human dignity becomes very difficult, despite its material and political reality. This is because, in philosophical terms, it must take into account both the

complex of observable contemporary human relations, and respect the functioning of the human mind.

Despite this, on all occasions when we have informed the masses of our people of the commitment we have made to end the bucket system, as during the various izimbizo, invariably they respond to this announcement with great warmth and enthusiasm. I have no doubt that the people respond in this manner because they understand very well how important this is to the restoration of the dignity of those affected.

And thus we return to the supremely important national and continental matter of the political objectives of the masses of our people, and the relationship of this to the critical matter of "bucket toilets", and the related restoration of the dignity of the African masses, at home, on the African Continent, and the African Diaspora.

In 1892, addressing the challenge of the restoration of African dignity in a pamphlet entitled "A Talk Upon My Native Land", the future first President of the ANC, the Rev John L Dube, recited these words:

"Hail, O Africa, thy ransom! Raise to heaven thy grateful song! Last in rank among the nations, Thou shalt lead the choral throng, - Land of promise! Thy Redeemer's praise prolong!"

In his famous 1906 article, "The Regeneration of Africa", the principal convenor of the conference that formed the ANC in 1912, Pixley ka Isaka Seme said:

"Oh, for that historian who, with the open pen of truth, will bring to Africa's claim the strength of written proof. He will tell of a race whose onward tide was often swelled with tears, but in whose heart bondage has not quenched the fire of former years. He will write that in these later days when Earth's noble ones are named, she has a roll of honor too, of whom she is not ashamed. The giant is awakening! From the four corners of the earth Africa's sons, who have been proved through fire and sword, are marching to the future's golden door bearing the records of deeds of valor done..."

"The regeneration of Africa means that a new and unique civilization is soon to be added to the world. The African is not a proletarian in the world of science and art. He has precious creations of his own, of ivory, of copper and of gold, fine, plated willow-ware and weapons of superior workmanship. Civilization resembles an organic being in its development - it is born, it perishes, and it can propagate itself. More particularly, it resembles a plant, it takes root in the teeming earth, and when the seeds fall in other soils new varieties sprout up. The most essential departure of this new civilization is that it shall be thoroughly spiritual and humanistic -indeed a regeneration moral and eternal!"

The first President of the ANC Youth League, Anton Lembede, extolled this vision in his 1946 article on the "Policy of the Congress Youth League", in which he said:

"The divine destiny of the African people is National Freedom. Unless Africans achieve national freedom as early as possible they will be confronted with the impending doom and imminent catastrophe of extermination; they will not be able to survive the satanic forces economic,

social and political, unleashed against them...Moral and physical degeneration is assuming alarming proportions. Moral and spiritual degeneration manifests itself in such abnormal and pathological phenomena as loss of self-confidence, inferiority complex, a feeling of frustration, the worship and idolisation of whitemen, foreign leaders and ideologies. All these are symptoms of a pathological state of mind...

"It will only be when Africans are free that they will be able to exploit fully and bring to fruition their divine talent and contribute something new towards the general welfare and prosperity of Mankind; and it will only be then that Africans will enter on a footing of equality with other nations of the world into the commonwealth of nations; and only then will Africans occupy their rightful and honourable place among the nations of the world."

In his Nobel Peace Prize lecture delivered in Oslo in 1961, Inkosi Albert Luthuli said:

"The revolutionary stirrings of our continent are setting the past aside. Our people everywhere from north to south of the continent are reclaiming their land, their right to participate in government, their dignity as men, their nationhood. Thus, in the turmoil of revolution, the basis for peace and brotherhood in Africa is being restored by the resurrection of national sovereignty and independence, of equality and the dignity of man..."

"Still licking the scars of past wrongs perpetrated on her, could (Africa) not be magnanimous and practise no revenge? Her hand of friendship scornfully rejected, her pleas for justice and fair-play spurned, should she not nonetheless seek to turn enmity into amity? Though robbed of her lands, her independence and opportunities - this, oddly enough, often in the name of civilization and even Christianity, should she not see her destiny as being that of making a distinctive contribution to human progress and human relationships with a peculiar new African flavour enriched by the diversity of cultures she enjoys, thus building on the summits of present human achievement an edifice that would be one of the finest tributes to the genius of man?"

"She should see this hour of her fulfilment as a challenge to her to labour on until she is purged of racial domination, and as an opportunity of reassuring the world that her national aspiration lies, not in overthrowing white domination to replace it by a black caste, but in building a non-racial democracy that shall be a monumental brotherhood, a 'brotherly community' with none discriminated against on grounds of race or colour."

In his Inauguration Address in 1994, the first President of liberated South Africa, Nelson Mandela, said:

"We have triumphed in the effort to implant hope in the breasts of the millions of our people. We enter into a covenant that we shall build the society in which all South Africans, both black and white, will be able to walk tall, without any fear in their hearts, assured of their inalienable right to human dignity - a rainbow nation at peace with itself and the world...Never, never and never again shall it be that this beautiful land will again experience the oppression of one by another and suffer the indignity of being the skunk of the world...The sun shall never set on so glorious a human achievement!"

For over 100 years, the leaders and representatives of our people have emphasised that a fundamental outcome of our emancipation from colonial and white minority domination must be the restoration of the dignity of the African people everywhere and the elevation of Africa to her rightful place among the rest of humanity.

As we work today, during the year of the 95th anniversary of the ANC that has upheld this vision throughout its life, we must constantly ask ourselves the question - what progress are we making towards creating the "new civilisation that [is]...thoroughly spiritual and humanistic -- indeed a regeneration moral and eternal!"

The provision of decent sanitation for all our people will mark an important step forward along the long road towards the construction of this new civilisation. It is therefore imperative that we honour the commitment we made to the people, to end the dehumanising system of bucket toilets in all our formal settlements. Thus will we demonstrate that we fully understand the message handed down to us through the generations, that "Last in rank among the nations, Thou shalt lead the choral throng, -Land of promise!"

Thabo Mbeki

SAFER COMMUNITIES

Concerted fight against crime must be grounded in reality

If South Africa is going to achieve success in the struggle for a society that is safe and secure, it will need to respond in unity and with determination on the basis of a realistic and factual understanding of the extent of crime in the country.

This was the position of the ANC's National Executive Committee (NEC) as it emerged from its annual lekgotla last week. It was echoing the call it made in the January 8th Statement that during the course of 2007, "we need to make every possible effort decisively to tackle this challenge, drawing on the resources and capacity of all sectors of society in a united front against crime."

This effort needs to be undertaken together with the broader national effort to defeat poverty through accelerated and shared growth and intensified interventions to improve the lives of the poor. These are all critical parts of the mission of the democratic movement to eradicate all the vestiges of our colonial and apartheid past.

In the face of a sustained campaign by some to seek political gain from the problem of crime, the people of South Africa need to maintain a steady focus on the key problems, challenges and practical tasks that need to be undertaken to defeat this scourge. We cannot allow this important work to be diverted by the feverish denunciations that have preoccupied so many in the media in the two weeks since the ANC presented the fight against crime as one its priority tasks for the year. The most vehement criticism has been reserved for those who have dared to suggest that our efforts should be guided by concrete reality rather than by alarmist hyperbole.

In the January 8th statement, the NEC said: "In the decade before the democratic breakthrough of 1994, the devastating impact of apartheid social and economic policies and the use of the police services as instruments of repression gave rise to a dramatic growth in levels of crime and violence in our society.

"This scourge has continued to bedevil our young democracy. Though progress has been made in gradually reducing levels of most categories of serious crime, crime continues to impact severely on the quality of life on our people. Without decisive action to curb crime, it could undermine our efforts to ensure the country is able to realise its social and economic potential.

"As we have consistently said, our response to crime must be based on a clear understanding of the causes of crime and the various forms that it takes across society. Our response needs to be well-considered, effectively coordinated and comprehensive. It also needs to be sustainable and its progress measurable."

Among other things, this effort will require a close examination of crime trends since our democratic breakthrough of 1994 (and even before). It demands an honest assessment of the crime statistics, and how crime patterns have changed in response to crime-fighting efforts, demographic shifts, social development and other factors.

Contrary to the claims peddled by many in the public arena, these statistics indicate that the incidence of crime as a whole has decreased in the period since the advent of democracy. The crime rate, which is the number of serious crimes per 100,000 of the population, declined by 10% between 1994 and 2006. Categories of crime such as murder, attempted murder, assault, car theft and burglary have dropped steadily over the last four to five years.

Although there is absolutely no factual basis for the claim that the incidence of crime has increased significantly since the advent of democracy or that "crime is out of control", the statistics clearly point to the fact that - as with poverty and unemployment - there is still much work to be done.

"To this end, we have worked since 1994 to transform the South African Police Service (SAPS) and other institutions of the criminal justice system to serve all our people more effectively and to work to safeguard their safety and security. We have increased the numbers of police personnel, improved systems of coordination and management, and improved the efficiency of our courts and prosecution services.

"Yet we have recognised from the birth of our democracy that these efforts will not succeed unless we make tangible progress in addressing those socio-economic conditions that feed crime and violence. We have recognised that the police service and government agencies cannot fight crime alone, and that it requires the involvement and active participation of all communities and all sections of society to meet this challenge," the NEC said in the January 8th Statement.

The lekgotla last weekend endorsed the implementation of an extensive mass campaign to mobilise communities to assume leadership in the struggle for peace, stability and safer places to live.

Among other things, the campaign will seek to strengthen partnerships between communities and the police services, and between the public and private sectors. It will focus on the reinvigoration of community policing forums as effective and credible sites for coordination, monitoring and popular participation. Critically, the campaign will pay particular attention to crimes of violence, especially as they affect women and children.

The campaign will also involve practical action to demonstrate support for the members of the police service who find themselves on the frontline in the fight against crime. Society needs to send a clear message to armed criminals that they stand alone. All peace-loving South Africans need to unite and work with the police and other security services to ensure that such criminals are apprehended and face the full might of the law. Like other violent criminals, those who attack police officers should face the most stringent of sentences. Attacks on police personnel are a direct assault on the people of this country.

The ANC will therefore seek the broadest participation of all sectors of society in this mass campaign to mobilise communities and isolate criminals.

UN AND HUMAN RIGHTS

Principled support for democratic change in Myanmar

The ANC should work, together with other organisations locally and internationally, to campaign for the restoration of democracy and human rights in Myanmar (Burma), the ANC National Executive Committee said at its recent lekgotla.

The lekgotla endorsed the position taken by the government to vote against the UN Security Council resolution on Myanmar on the grounds that the matter falls outside the mandate of the Security Council and properly belongs within the ambit of the UN Human Rights Council.

"The meeting reiterated the ANC's deep concern at the situation in Myanmar, including widespread repression and the continued house arrest of Aung San Suu Kyi, and urged that these matters be taken up through the appropriate organs of the UN system," it said.

The NEC statement supported government's position that Myanmar resolution illustrates the importance of safeguarding the integrity of the different UN entities. South Africa's vote was in defence of the integrity of the UN system, which is made up of different bodies and institutions each with its own specific mandate.

The mandate of the Security Council is to maintain international peace and security, while other organs address matters related to human rights situations. Like many other countries South Africa was not convinced that the situation in Myanmar posed a threat to international peace and security. The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) said earlier in January that Myanmar did not pose a threat to international peace and security.

The ANC-led government has pledged that South Africa will continue to endeavour to strengthen the capacity of the UN to address global issues and promote peace, security and human rights. South Africa is fully committed to the UN agenda especially on matters of peace, human rights and development. It will continue to condemn the abuse of human rights in all its manifestation and wherever they may occur in the world including Myanmar.

It said South Africa's approach to the work of the Security Council is also informed by the need to strengthen multilateralism and the reform of the United Nations in general so that is better able to promote international peace, security, human rights and development.

South Africa's position on this matter was also informed by support for the UN Secretary General's initiative to address abuse of human rights in Myanmar. The special envoy appointed to deal with the situation in Myanmar, Professor Ibrahim Gambari, recently visited the country as part of his mandate. Gambari briefed the Security Council in November 2006 on his interaction with the Myanmar military regime and members of the opposition, including political detainees. During his visit he had emphasised the importance of the need for the Myanmar government to take concrete steps to implement democratic changes and release political prisoners.

South Africa took the view that the Security Council resolution would effectively have undermined the initiative of the UN Secretary General. It was a general political statement on the situation in Myanmar and proposed no concrete alternative action. It would have undermined initiatives to continue to engage the government of Myanmar and could have closed the door to private and confidential communications between the UN Secretary General and the Myanmar government.

South Africa's position on the Myanmar resolution was intended to strengthen practical efforts within the UN system to achieve democratic change in Myanmar. This work needs to be reinforced by an intensification of solidarity and support to the people of Myanmar.

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