

ADDRESS BY THE DEPUTY PRESIDENT, THE HON. MR THABO MBEKI: DISABLED PEOPLE OF SOUTH AFRICA, NATIONAL CONGRESS, BLOEMFONTEIN

18 OCTOBER 1997

Chairperson,

In the year 1988, deadly Apartheid assassins exploded a car bomb in the street of Maputo. It was a huge explosion which reverberated throughout the city. It threw up a cloud of black and white smoke which eddied in the air and, for a moment, hung up there as though uncertain of what had happened.

A distance away, pieces of hot broken metal clattered, strewn on the cobbled street.

Albie Sachs was dragged out of the rubble; his blood splattered on the pavement, his limbs broken.

A few years after that horrific experience, and indeed, several years before the birth of our democracy in 1994, Albie put down in one of his books the following philosophical truth:

"All revolutions are impossible until they happen; then they become inevitable. South Africa has for long been trembling between the impossible and the inevitable, and it is in this singularly unstable situation that the question of human rights and the basis of government in post-Apartheid society demands attention".

Certainly, Albie Sachs' limbs had been broken on that fateful day. But his soul, his heart, his integrity as a member of the human race, and more important, his belief as a fighter for justice and everything which sets us apart from and above the animal kingdom, had not been broken. If anything, it had been tempered in that experience.

In these words, Albie was talking of human rights in the universal sense. But certainly he was also speaking for many who might have been disabled in the cause of the struggle for liberation both inside and outside the country.

He was speaking on behalf of those who have been physically and mentally challenged through lack of adequate nutrition and access to medical attention.

Those who are victims of road accidents, of inadequate safety in the mine and the shop floor.

Those who met their challenged condition in the cause of the pursuit of sporting excellence have also not escaped his consideration.

His words were both philosophical and prophetic. He was addressing himself to the inevitability of a thorough discussion and a clear policy formulation by the democratic government on the question of human rights.

In the same book, Albie Sachs goes further to attest that "No one gives us rights, we win them in struggle. They exist in our hearts before they exist on paper".

This statement underscores what is more intrinsic in our political philosophy than the existence of a document called the Constitution, the Bill of Rights and the White Paper which sets the standard for the way this government, and this nation, approaches the question of disability.

Chairperson,

Our political philosophy, regardless of our past and indeed because of it, commits us to the continuous and sustained material, spiritual and moral upliftment and fulfilment of all the individual persons who constitute our society regardless of race, ethnicity, gender, creed and disability.

It is however the disabled that we talk about today.

For us it is particularly heartening that we talk of the empowerment of the disabled on the day when the Disabled People of South Africa (DPSA) are holding their congress.

We take this opportunity to congratulate the DPSA for occupying the front column in the struggle for the empowerment and the emancipation of all the challenged people of our country.

Indeed, we are not shy in stating that, all of us, as South Africans, need an ongoing programme of education, mobilisation and organisation in order to appreciate the significance of the position which the disabled occupy in our society. We still need to appreciate the extent of the potential which resides in the condition of those who are challenged.

For example, the need for this education and mobilisation is evidenced by the number of public facilities under construction in our country which do not recognise the fact that those who use special devices for mobility might need access to them.

We need to commit our society to the creation of an ever-expanding frontier of the dignity of the disabled. The achievement of that dignity for this section of our society should be predicated on the freedom of the individual to determine his or her destiny.

It is estimated that South Africa has got the population of six million disabled people. That is roughly six times the population of Swaziland.

This stark statistics is an indication of how much of a human resource can be unleashed for the betterment of our country if we can succeed to help the disabled of our country to empower themselves.

The progress we make in the betterment of the condition of life of the people finds a sterner judgement when evaluated against the progress we make in improving the condition of those who move from the starting point of greater disadvantage.

It is they who deserve our unqualified attention.

We have also committed ourselves to be signatories to those international conventions which seek to prevent the infliction of disabilities to the innocent. For example, we recently spearheaded the treaty for the abolition of the production and distribution of anti-personal land mines in the world with great success.

Chairperson,

We also suffer the burden of pain, of shame and of guilt when we behold on our Television screens the African landscape peopled by multitudes, young and old, who carry torn bodies and broken limbs.

Our quest and our effort to bring about an African continent characterised by peace, stability and prosperity is motivated by the same principles which underpin our struggle to empower the disabled.

Chairperson,

We are about to table the White Paper before Cabinet. This paper attempts to lay down the policy and the strategy which will guide the action of the government and the state on the question of the disabled.

This paper has put paid to the old notion of disability as a medical problem, the problem of those who are ill, weak and requiring of our pity in abundance. This is not the challenge facing departments of welfare alone.

The challenges and experiences of the disabled are the challenges and experiences of society as a whole. All of us must rise up and face our weaknesses because it is precisely here that the real disability is located.

To that extent, the White Paper sets out a programme of action for all government departments which will encompass, not a separate disability programme, but the incorporation of a disability programme and related rights into the entire function of government and the state.

We assume this position speaks to what we mean when we speak of a people-centred society - that the criterion we wish to be used to judge the success or the failure of our actions is the extent to which these actions result in the betterment or the worsening of the condition of us all.

Certainly, we cannot claim that we are liberated if we do not assume the struggle of the disabled as our own.

This is a clear endorsement of the conviction that we are all part of a greater nation, a nation whose very strength lies in its diversity, whose greatest resource is located in a destiny towards which we are all moving together.

Another significant thing about the White Paper is that an attempt has been made to make sure that it is the product of wide consultation, especially among those whose contribution in the struggle for the empowerment of the disabled cannot be doubted.

It has also, wherever appropriate, drawn from the experience of the people in other parts of the world.

The Office on the Status of the Disabled Persons already exists in the Presidency in Pretoria. The location of this office in the Presidency signifies our conviction that the struggle for the empowerment of the disabled should be driven and be co-ordinated at the highest level in government. It is a task which cannot be left to the care of individual line departments.

Chairperson,

In 1995 I felt greatly honoured when I was asked by some of you to assume the patronship of the disabled people of South Africa. I acceded to the honour because I believe that the attainment of human dignity cannot be reduced merely to the attainment of civil and political rights.

I sincerely believe that our human dignity also derives from our preparedness to confront the greatest challenges which face all of us as members of a common humanity.

But I have often said that, having accepted the challenge and the honour presented to me by you, you need to go further and formulate an agenda programme which the Patron of the Disabled in South Africa should promote.

I certainly take no comfort nor satisfaction in being a Patron who, all that he can do, is to pronounce his existence. I sincerely believe that something more purposeful can be done to promote this noble task.

Chairperson,

Our political liberation in 1994 marked the end of the revolution of one kind and the beginning of another. It marks the beginning of the revolution for the transformation of our country.

If this second revolution was impossible before 1994, it has now become inevitable.

There is an unstoppable fountain of desire in our hearts. The White Paper we have been talking about is simply an expression of this unstoppable fountain. Certainly, as Albie Sachs said, this unstoppable desire exists in our hearts before it exists on paper.

It is a human essence of life.

It is not merely the White Paper that will promote our rights but our continuous struggle to uphold our dignity and our humanity.

Lastly, Chairperson, we would like to draw your conference's attention to the fact that the White Paper is extensive and comprehensive. It is not possible for the government and the state to implement everything contained in the White Paper all at once.

Apart from the fact of the limitation imposed by the scarcity of resources available to all of us, the Paper envisages a revolutionary overhaul in our approach and our programme of action.

It is for that reason that we propose that we help the government to work out priorities on what needs to be done. We don't believe that this is an exclusive right we should abrogate to ourselves. We need guidance in drawing up the programme of priorities.

Chairperson,

I wish you a successful congress.

Thank you.