

Address at the French National Assembly Paris

18 November 2003

Distinguished President of the National Assembly,
Honourable Representatives of the People of the French Republic:

I am certain that you, the esteemed Members of this honoured House, the National Assembly of France, will recognise these words that were addressed to the Representatives of the People of France 210 years ago:

“We wish in our country that morality may be substituted for egotism, probity for false honour, principles for usages, duties for good manners, the empire of reason for the tyranny of fashion, a contempt of vice for a contempt of misfortune, pride for insolence, magnanimity for vanity, the love of glory for the love of money, good people for good company, merit for intrigue, genius for wit, truth for tinsel show, the attractions of happiness for the ennui of sensuality, the grandeur of man for the littleness of the great, a people magnanimous, powerful, happy, for a people amiable, frivolous and miserable; in a word, all the virtues and miracles of a Republic instead of all the vices and absurdities of a Monarchy.

“We wish, in a word, to fulfill the intentions of nature and the destiny of man, realise the promises of philosophy, and acquit providence of a long reign of crime and tyranny. That France, once illustrious among enslaved nations, may, by eclipsing the glory of all free countries that ever existed, become a model to nations, a terror to oppressors, a consolation to the oppressed, an ornament of the universe and that, by sealing the work with our blood, we may at least witness the dawn of the bright day of universal happiness. This is our ambition, - this is the end of our efforts....”

As you know, these words, described as ‘Principles of Political Morality’, were spoken by the Jacobin, Maximilien Robespierre, in February 1794. I have quoted them not because I have come into your midst as a Jacobin.

I have cited them because they communicate an inspiring message about a French people that dared to be free, that dared to act boldly, to create a new world. We too have dared to absorb them into our own consciousness because, though two centuries old, they tell us what we should do about our patrimony and ourselves.

I have made bold to recite them in this hallowed chamber because they have suggested that we have a right to make demands on a nation which cannot but be a great nation, otherwise it could not have sprung on the world an epoch-making Revolution and placed on our firmament a lodestar that cannot be extinguished, the Declaration of the Rights of Man.

I have not known whether it was right that I should stand here and recall the words of a towering French citizen of a turbulent France of the past, who also said: “To punish the oppressors of humanity is clemency; to forgive them is cruelty.” But what I have known is that it was not possible to come into this Chamber and not be reminded, forcefully, of its origins and what was done in this historic city in 1789, which gave birth to much that, today, we take for granted.

Esteemed representatives of the people of France, I am honoured and privileged to bring you the warm greetings and convey the sincere sentiments of friendship of the people of South Africa. In all humility, I thank you for the possibility you have given us to speak to you inside this Chamber.

Our people, and I as part of them, gaze on France and see in her a people of whom Maximilien Robespierre spoke, that strives still to “become a model to nations, a terror to oppressors, a consolation to the oppressed, an ornament of the universe and that, by sealing the work with (its) blood...may at least

witness the dawn of the bright day of universal happiness.” As South Africans, we have no choice but to conclude that such a people cannot but be friends and allies.

In 1917, during the First World War, a transport ship, the Mendi, carrying 823 African men from our country, sank in the English Channel because of an accidental collision with a friendly British ship. 616 perished in the icy waters that separate you from Great Britain.

Had these survived the journey from their motherland, they would have served in French docks, handling the materiel that was needed by the allied forces confronting the German armies. Some would have served in the logistics units that had to brave German fire to deliver food and ammunition to the men who occupied the frontline trenches of combat in a war that claimed so many lives of the combatants on both sides of the conflict.

Some of their compatriots and ours are buried at a cemetery at Bois d’Elville, near Longueval, and others at the British military cemetery at Arques-la-Bataille. The permanent domicile of these South African souls in France communicates the message that our two peoples are linked by bonds that are unbreakable.

In 1816, a century before these South Africans perished on French soil, a young South African woman, Sarah Bartmann had died in this city, having been brought here from her country of birth, via Great Britain, to be displayed to the public as a curiosity. I would like to convey the sincere thanks of our people for the decision taken by the National Assembly last year, to repatriate Sarah Bartmann’s remains to the country of her birth. She has found her final place of rest above the Gamtoos River, in the Eastern Cape province of our country, where she was born.

But even earlier than Sarah Bartmann’s forced arrival in France, at the end of the 17th century, our country had received Frenchmen and women forced to flee from religious persecution in their own country. These were the Huguenots, members of the Reformed Church established by the Protestant John Calvin, who found refuge and a new home in our country, contributing much to its evolution, including a successful wine industry.

But, Mr President, as the Honourable Members of the National Assembly are aware, like the people of France in the 18th century, we too had to engage in struggle to free ourselves from another tyranny. That struggle took place over many centuries.

The first European to fall in an armed skirmish with our people was the first Portuguese viceroy in India, Dom Francisco de Almeida. This happened in 1510 in a clash between Portuguese sailors commanded by de Almeida, and the Khoi people among whom Sarah Bartmann belonged, signaling the beginning of a conflict that finally ended 484 years later, in 1994, when our people gained the liberty foreseen in the Declaration of the Rights of Man of 1789.

It was therefore inevitable that we, the victims of a pernicious system of racist white minority rule, which considered and treated us as sub-human, would identify with the French Revolution and draw inspiration from what was done in this country which led to the solemn declaration that “Men are born and remain free and equal in rights”, which proclaimed the vision of Equality, Liberty, Fraternity!

We have come to France carrying the knowledge in our hearts that we are visiting an ancient people who, as Maximilien Robespierre said, “by sealing the work with (their) blood...may at least witness the dawn of the bright day of universal happiness.” We have therefore known that to visit France is to come among friends and partners in the struggle to build a better world.

But the question we must answer together is whether it is possible to build that better world! We come out of Africa and therefore have no choice but to ask this question. This is because our continent has great need of its own “dawn of the bright day of universal happiness.”

The peoples of our continent, the Cradle of Humanity, cry out everyday for a better life of hope rather than despair. And yet millions wake up daily to a life of seemingly unending poverty.

Millions have resigned themselves to a life of restless nights and days of lethargy caused by empty stomachs. Even where they only have water to fill the void, as they drink they expose their frail bodies to water borne illnesses. Millions are ravaged by diseases, which can be cured or managed, but nevertheless envelope helpless millions, imposing avoidable morbidity and early death.

They crowd together in urban slums preying on one another through criminal misconduct, like beasts informed by the instinct of the survival of the fittest, slowly suffocating from the foul smell of the open sewers and rotting piles of accumulating refuse and the stench of poverty. The clean air and the quiet of the countryside and the pleasing sights of nature hide a reality of lives without hope.

Unable to read or write, they are imprisoned behind an impenetrable wall of darkness that condemns them ever to recede to the periphery of the human world, as others advance in the continuous flight from ignorance and unknowing.

They can never be certain that tomorrow the guns will not bark once again, portending death and added misery as the poor engage in a bitter struggle to claim first place in a scramble for scarce resources and opportunities. They do not know whether the following day another soldier will not elevate himself, assisted by the guns in his hands, to proclaim himself the ruler who cannot and shall not be questioned.

France is an important part of an historic European process. This is the European Union which, already composed of 15 countries, is set to be further enlarged with the addition of 10 new members. Europe seems set on an irreversible course towards integration.

The modern intelligentsia that emerged in Africa in the 19th century began the movement towards African integration and unity. Today this has found expression in the African Union and its socio-economic development programme, NEPAD. Together these two initiatives represent Africa's determined effort to achieve the vision first projected more than a century ago. And because of the example set by the EU, we have drawn on the European experience to design our own Union.

For us integration and unity are matters of critical importance. They are of central relevance to the African struggle to defeat poverty and underdevelopment. Many of our countries have very small populations and limited possibilities to develop on their own, relying solely on their resources.

Our own experience also tells us that development in one country will inevitably attract people from other countries as economic migrants. This is also facilitated by the fact that very often, the colonial boundaries we inherited have served to divide communities and families.

Taking all these factors into account, and conscious of the imperatives dictated to us by our past, we have as Africans decided that we must do everything we can to determine our own future.

Accordingly, we are paying maximum attention to the important issues of peace and stability, democracy and human rights, poverty eradication, the improvement of the quality of life of all our people, and, of course, the political, economic and social integration of the various African regions and the continent itself.

The progress towards peace and democracy made in such countries as the Democratic Republic of Congo, Burundi, the Comores, Liberia and Sudan is an expression of Africa's determination seriously to address her challenges. In this regard, we would like to express our appreciation for everything the French government and people have done to help us find solutions to the problems that continue to afflict the Cote d'Ivoire.

In a month's time, the Protocol enabling the establishment of the Pan-African Parliament will come into force. We expect that the first session of this parliament, with members from all the African parliaments, will take place at the headquarters of the African Union in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, in January next year. This will mark a decisive step forward in Africa's efforts to consolidate democracy and human rights.

Whatever the difficulties and obstacles, we will persist in the effort to achieve Africa's renaissance. The gigantic effort in which we are engaged, to realise Africa's renewal and address the legacy of half-a-millennium of slavery, colonialism and bad governance, may very well require that our continent generates the popular energies that gave birth to a democratic and republican France.

But it is also clear that it will be extremely difficult for us to achieve our goal of the social and economic renewal of Africa without the support of France and the rest of the developed world. In this context, I must express our deep appreciation for the G8 support for NEPAD and the important role of President Jacques Chirac in this regard.

Interestingly and instructively, the EU has long recognised the difficulties that attach to the struggle against poverty and underdevelopment, and taken the appropriate steps to address this challenge. This is reflected in the decisions to establish the Structural Funds and the purposes for which these are expended.

As the Honourable Members of the National Assembly are aware, some of these Structural Funds are used to address the challenge of development in those regions within the EU with per capita GDP below 75% of the EU.

A document of the European Commission on Regional Policy says two words "solidarity and cohesion, sum up the values behind regional policy in the EU:

"Solidarity because the policy aims at benefiting citizens and regions that are in some way economically and socially deprived compared to EU averages.

"Cohesion recognizes that there are positive benefits for all in narrowing the gaps of income and wealth between the poorer countries and regions and the better off."

"These days, thanks to the EU's structural policies, prosperity and its fruits are much more widely distributed around the Union.

"But many old inequalities have not yet been eradicated...The impact of these disadvantages is frequently evident in social deprivation, poor quality schools, higher unemployment and inadequate infrastructures.

"Solidarity, economic and social progress and reinforced cohesion were objectives all written into the preamble of 1997's Treaty of Amsterdam. Article 158 of the Treaty reads "... the Community shall aim at reducing disparities between the development of various regions and the backwardness of the least favoured regions or islands, including rural areas".

On June 17, 2003, European Commissioner Michel Barnier presented a study on the impact of the Structural Funds during the period 1994-99. Among other things, he said:

"The results of this study are further proof of the added value of European regional policy. This policy has contributed to growth, competitiveness and convergence, helping the whole of the Union to take advantage of the opportunities of Europe's single market."

The Structural Funds had increased the GDP in the less developed regions by between 1.4% and 4.7%. 800,000 jobs were created in these regions with the support of these Funds. 36,000 km of roads had been constructed or improved. Support had been granted to 214,000 firms. Over 8 million people had been trained to give them market related skills. All manner of infrastructure had been built covering a wide area, including educational facilities, the environment and industrial sites.

Of interest also is the fact that the study indicated that the direct impact of the Structural Funds in the less developed regions was accompanied by positive indirect returns to other Member States through higher imports and increased trade. An earlier study had given a quantitative estimate of the benefits that accrue to the rest of the EU as a result of the development of the less developed regions.

Honourable Members:

I am certain that we are of one mind that poverty, including the worsening poverty in Africa, is the biggest problem confronting the global community of nations. It was because of this that the international community adopted the UN Millennium Development Goals, the Monterrey Consensus and the Johannesburg Plan of Action for Sustainable Development.

To respond to this challenge in our own country, our government has adopted policies similar to those represented by the EU Structural Funds. Relying on the resources generated by the developed sector of our economy, we are implementing programmes to transfer some resources to our own poorest and underdeveloped regions and communities.

But we can do this because of the presence within our country of a relatively strong First World economy. Not many other African countries have this possibility. Accordingly, like the less developed regions within the EU, to break out of the poverty trap, they have to attract large resources transfers from elsewhere in the world, given the much worse position in which they are, relative to the less developed EU regions, and the far fewer possibilities they have to depend on the market for their development.

We are firmly of the view that global human society disposes of sufficient capital, technological and intellectual resources to defeat the scourge of poverty and underdevelopment. But for this to happen is going to require that globally we achieve a realignment of power and what Robespierre called the empire of reason.

Reason tells us that it was correct for the European Union to decide to intervene in the less developed regions within the Union using public sector funds, since it was clear that the market on its own would not be able to solve the problem of underdevelopment.

Reason therefore also tells us that in our approach to the challenge of African poverty and underdevelopment, we should apply the same correct reasoning we have applied to the less developed regions of the EU. Thus, we should repeat, using the words of the European Commission:

“Solidarity and cohesion, should sum up the values behind policy of the developed world towards Africa: solidarity because the policy aims at benefiting citizens of a continent that is economically and socially deprived, while cohesion recognizes that there are positive benefits for all in narrowing the gaps of income and wealth between the poor of Africa and we, who are better off.”

The reality however is that the power to make and act on this statement rests with those who either control or have access to the resources that help the peoples of Africa to extricate themselves from the gross indignity of extreme poverty and underdevelopment.

All contemporary history communicates the message that in many instances power is used to advance the interests of the powerful, even to the point of the negation of everything that reason suggests to be

the right course of action. To free the 800 million Africans from poverty is to create great possibilities for the expansion of the world economy, for the benefit also of those who are better off.

Humanity has the resources to help the peoples of Africa to end African poverty and underdevelopment. Some among this humanity have the power to act to achieve this result. Those in need of a demonstration of human solidarity have no power to influence the decision to establish International Structural Funds for their benefit. Those with the power to take this decision face immediate challenges of their own, resulting in driving the most urgent challenge facing all humanity to the periphery of global action.

Perhaps all this calls for our own Age of Enlightenment, with its own Jean Jacques Rousseau. Perhaps, together, we should cry out, as did Shakespeare's Hamlet: "The world is out of joint", and together take the decision that we will set it right.

Because we are speaking at this historic place, born of a revolutionary upheaval that helped to change the world, we can gather enough courage to ask of the representatives of the people of France, the descendants of those who had the daring to set afoot the events that began in 1789, that we join together to make the statement that it is our ambition at last to witness the dawn of the bright day of universal happiness.

I thank you for your attention.