

Statement at the handing over of the final report of the TRC

Pretoria, March 21, 2003

Archbishop Tutu, Chairperson of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission,
Members of the TRC,
Minister Maduna,
Speaker of the National Assembly,
Chairperson of the Council of Provinces,
Ladies and gentlemen:

The Promotion of National Unity and Reconciliation Act of 1995, which authorised the establishment of the TRC, says that "the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1993, provides a historic bridge between the past of a deeply divided society characterised by strife, conflict, untold suffering and injustice, and a future founded on the recognition of human rights, democracy and peaceful coexistence for all South Africans, irrespective of colour, race, class, belief or sex..."

It goes on to say that "the Constitution states that the pursuit of national unity, the well-being of all South African citizens and peace, require reconciliation between the people of South Africa and the reconstruction of society...There is need for understanding but not for vengeance, a need for reparation but not for retaliation, a need for ubuntu but not for victimisation..."

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission was established to help us achieve especially these latter objectives of responding to the gross violations of human rights in the period since March 1st, 1960, with understanding and not vengeance, reparation and not retaliation, informed by the spirit of ubuntu.

I would like to thank the Commission for the work it did to help us realise these goals. We deeply appreciate the seriousness and dedication with which the Commissioners and the staff of the Commission approached their work. We will study the Report we have just received with the close attention it deserves and respond to its recommendations as quickly as possible. This includes the matter of final reparations.

I would also like to thank all those who approached the Commission, both perpetrators and victims. It is clear that our country as a whole accepted and supports the path we took to address the political crimes of the past.

This has ensured that we avoid a disastrous racial conflict that would have cost the lives of many people and denied up the possibility to reconstruct South Africa as a peaceful and non-racial country. Those who have, in the recent past, decided to resort to force to impose their views on the country will not succeed.

This is not only because the criminal justice system is perfectly capable of acting against these acts of terrorism, but critically because the overwhelming majority of our people, both black and white, support the objectives stated in the 1993 Constitution that we should all pursue the goals of peace and reconciliation.

The current regrettable war against Iraq emphasises the importance of these goals both for ourselves and others in other parts of the world. We tried our best to work with the rest of the international community to ensure that Iraq was disarmed of any weapons of mass destruction she might have, using peaceful means. We remain convinced that this objective could have been achieved.

All we can do now is merely to pray that the war is brought to an end as quickly as possible with as few casualties as possible. There will be time in future to reflect and act upon all matters that attend to the issue of Iraq.

I am pleased immediately to hand over copies of the Report to the Honourable Presiding Officers of our national Houses of Parliament. I am certain that Parliament will itself study and discuss the Report and make such recommendations it may consider appropriate.

The Government will also interact with civil society organisations that are representative of our people to encourage the broadest possible engagement of our people with the Report.

At the same time, we must continue to focus on the central matter stated in the 1993 Constitution of peace, reconciliation among the people of South Africa and the reconstruction of society. We must therefore persist in the effort fundamentally to transform our country, conscious of the interdependence between the goals of social transformation and national reconciliation.

Undoubtedly, the Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission will make an important contribution to this process. But ahead of us is a protracted struggle truly to transform South Africa into the truly non-racial, non-sexist, prosperous and human society visualised in our Constitution.

Once more I thank the Truth and Reconciliation Commission for the work it has done and commend its Final Report to our country and people.

Thank you.