

Speech at the Launch of the African Renaissance Institute

Pretoria October 11 1999

Chairperson,
Distinguished Elders of Africa,
Secretary General of the Organisation of African Unity,
Your Excellencies Ministers, Ambassadors and High Commissioners,
Distinguished participants,
Comrades,
Ladies and Gentlemen:

I am very pleased indeed to welcome you to the launch of the African Renaissance Institute. I sincerely thank you for giving us, as South Africans, the opportunity to host this launch and for me to speak at this Opening Session.

I would also like to welcome to our country those of our brothers and sisters who come from beyond our borders.

Once more, we would like to express our profound appreciation to you all for the contribution that you made to our own struggle for liberation.

Liberated South Africa is therefore your home, not merely because it is an African country, but because without your determined struggles, perhaps we would not be a free people today.

The sacrifices the peoples of our Continent made to end the apartheid crime against humanity, which denied the very humanity of everybody who was African, were many and varied.

Among other things, the countries of Southern Africa also paid a very high price in human lives lost, as well as property and infrastructure destroyed, as they withstood the campaign of aggression and destabilisation conducted by the apartheid regime.

Undoubtedly, Angola and Mozambique paid the highest price in this regard.

I would like to take this opportunity, once more, to reiterate our profound appreciation to their governments and peoples for their extraordinary solidarity, which our people will never forget.

I am also very pleased to make special mention and pay tribute to our elders who are here, of whom we are justly proud and whose wisdom and African patriotism will make an important contribution to our common quest for an African Renaissance.

All of us are greatly distressed that that great son of all Africa, Mwalimu Julius Nyerere, is unable to be here, owing to a difficult health condition. I am certain that we would all agree that we should send him a heartfelt message of support and our wishes for his speedy recovery.

We have also received the apologies of another great son of our Continent, Ahmed Ben Bella, who could not join us owing to prior commitments.

Chairperson:

As you are aware, the movement of our own struggle for national liberation is the ANC, the African National Congress.

Brought up as we were by this movement and led by it, throughout the entirety of our political lives we have been exposed to the inspiring perspective of African unity and solidarity and the renewal of our Continent.

Beyond this, the struggle for our own liberation led to the development of perhaps the largest and most determined Pan-African movement of solidarity our continent has ever seen, involving both governments and all sections of the population, in every country.

We are therefore pleased and moved that some of our fellow Africans took the initiative to establish the Institute that we are launching today.

I am convinced that all of us present here share a common vision in favour of African unity and solidarity, African development and renewal and an end to the marginalisation of our Continent in world affairs and development processes.

It would seem to us vitally necessary that whereas, for some time, the achievement of these objectives has been left to our governments, it is necessary that we return this vision to the people.

We are therefore of the firm view that there is a critically important and urgent need to develop a Popular Movement for the African Renaissance.

Accordingly, we believe that political organisations and governments in all African countries should be mobilised to act in furtherance of the objectives of the African Renaissance.

Equally, the masses and their organisations in all African countries should similarly be mobilised and drawn into action.

We must also pay attention to the intelligentsia, the professionals, the trade unions, business people, women and the youth, the traditional leaders, cultural workers, the media and so on, to bring them into the popular struggle for Africa's rebirth.

The question has been posed repeatedly as to what we mean when we speak of an African Renaissance.

As all of us know, the word "renaissance" means rebirth, renewal, springing up anew. Therefore, when we speak of an African Renaissance, we speak of the rebirth and renewal of our continent.

This idea is not new to the struggles of the peoples of our continent for genuine emancipation. It has been propagated before by other activists for liberation, drawn from many countries.

But it has been suggested that when this perspective was advanced in earlier periods, the conditions did not exist for its realisation.

Accordingly, what is new about it today is that the conditions exist for the process to be enhanced, throughout the continent, leading to the transformation of the idea from a dream dreamt by visionaries to a practical programme of action for revolutionaries.

What, then, are these conditions! These are:

- the completion of the continental process of the liquidation of the colonial system in Africa, attained as a result of the liberation of South Africa;
- the recognition of the bankruptcy of neo-colonialism by the masses of the people throughout the continent, including the majority of the middle strata;

- the weakening of the struggle among the major powers for spheres of influence on our continent, as a consequence of the end of the Cold War; and,
- the acceleration of the process of globalisation.

As we take advantage of these changed circumstances, we must move from the fundamental proposition that the peoples of Africa share a common destiny.

Each one of our countries is constrained in its ability to achieve peace, stability, sustained development and a better life for the people, except in the context of the accomplishment of these objectives in other sister African countries as well.

Accordingly, it is objectively in the interest of all Africans to encourage the realisation of these goals throughout our Continent, at the same time as we pursue their attainment in each of our countries.

We speak of a continent which, while it led in the very evolution of human life and was a leading centre of learning, technology and the arts in ancient times, has experienced various traumatic epochs; each one of which has pushed her peoples deeper into poverty and backwardness.

We refer here to the three periods of:

- slavery, which robbed the continent of millions of her healthiest and most productive inhabitants and reinforced the racist and criminal notion that, as Africans, we are sub-human;
- imperialism and colonialism, which resulted in the rape of raw materials, the destruction of traditional agriculture and domestic food security, and the integration of Africa into the world economy as a subservient participant; and,
- neo-colonialism, which perpetuated this economic system, while creating the possibility for the emergence of new national elites in independent states, themselves destined to join the dominant global forces in oppressing and exploiting the masses of the people.

During this latter period, our continent has experienced:

- unstable political systems in which one-party states and military rule have occupied pride of place, leading to conflict, civil wars, genocide and the emergence of millions of displaced and refugee populations;
- the formation of predatory elites that have thrived on the basis of the looting of national wealth and the entrenchment of corruption;
- the growth of the international debt burden to the extent that, in some countries, combined with unfavourable terms of trade, it makes negative growth in national per capita income inevitable; and,
- actual declines in the standard of living and the quality of life for hundreds of millions of Africans.

The task of the African Renaissance derive from this experience, covering the entire period from slavery to date. They include:

- the establishment of democratic political systems to ensure the accomplishment of the goal that "the people shall govern",
- ensuring that these systems take into account African specifics so that, while being truly democratic and protecting human rights, they are nevertheless designed in ways which really ensure that political and, therefore, peaceful means can be used to address the competing interests of different social groups in each country;
- Establishing the institutions and procedures which would enable the continent collectively to deal with questions of democracy, peace and stability;

- achieving sustainable economic development that results in the continuous improvement of the standards of living and the quality of life of the masses of the people;
- qualitatively changing Africa's place in the world economy so that it is free of the yoke of the international debt burden and no longer a supplier of raw materials and an importer of manufactured goods;
- ensuring the emancipation of the women of Africa;
- successfully confronting the scourge of HIV/AIDS;
- the rediscovery of Africa's creative past to recapture the peoples' cultures, encourage artistic creativity and restore popular involvement in both accessing and advancing science and technology;
- strengthening the genuine independence of African countries and continent in their relations with the major powers and enhancing their role in the determination of the global system of governance in all fields, including politics, the economy, security, information and intellectual property, the environment and science and technology.

These goals can only be achieved through a genuinely popular and protracted struggle involving not only governments and political parties, but also the people themselves in all their formations.

Such a popular movement for the fundamental renewal of Africa would also have to take into account the multi-faceted reality that:

- it is engaged in an extremely complex struggle which would be opposed by forces of reaction from both within and without the continent;
- it would achieve both forward movement and suffer occasional setbacks;
- the continental offensive can only be sustained if the active populations of all countries are confident that none of the countries of the continent, regardless of the extent of its contribution to the Renaissance, seeks to impose itself on the rest as a new imperialist power; and,
- the forces for change have to be built up and consolidated within each country, without ignoring or underestimating the imperative and the potential for an increasing coordinated trans-national offensive for the mutually beneficial renewal of the continent.

From all this, it is clear that the achievement of the historically vital African Renaissance requires that the peoples of our continent should adopt a realist programme of action that will actually move Africa towards its real renewal.

Accordingly, ways have to be found to ensure that:

- the OAU is further strengthened so that in its work, it focuses on the strategic objective of the realisation of the African Renaissance;
- links are built across Africa's borders among all social sectors to increase the levels of cooperation and integration;
- steps are taken to ensure that both Africa and the rest of the world define the new (21st) century as an "African Century", in furtherance of the objective of the mobilisation of the peoples of the world to support the offensive for an African Renaissance; and,
- work is done to persuade the rest of the world, including such important institutions as the UN, the IMF, the World Bank, the WTO, NAFTA, the EU, MERCOSUR, ASEAN and others, to the point of view that we share with them the strategic view that it is obligatory that we all support the vision of an African Renaissance and that they should lend support to this process, guided by what the peoples of Africa themselves want.

The difficulty we will face with regard to the accomplishment of the last of these tasks is illustrated by the problem we are facing even as we stand here, of arriving at the point when we can conclude the bilateral agreement between our country and the European Union.

Stripped of all pretence, what has raised the question whether the agreement can be signed today or not, is the reality that many among the developed countries of the North have lost all sense of the noble idea of human solidarity.

What seems to predominate is the question, in its narrowest and most naked meaning - what is in it for me! What is in it for me! - and all this with absolutely no apology and no sense of shame.

None of us were present when the slaves were forced into the dungeons on the Isle of Goree in Senegal and on the island of Zanzibar.

But we would not be wrong if we came to the conclusion that those who survived these dungeons as well as their transportation across the oceans, did so because of a strong will to survive.

None of us were present when the people of the Congo were slaughtered in their millions, to satisfy the rapacious and insatiable greed of a Belgian monarch.

But we would not be wrong if we came to the conclusion that the Congolese people did not resort to mass suicide to escape the horror, because of a firm conviction that, in the end, as a people they were indestructible.

We were present when the colonial and racist powers put up the most determined resistance to deny the people of Algeria, Kenya, the Portuguese colonies, Zimbabwe, Namibia and South Africa their freedom.

We know that the peoples of these countries and our Continent as a whole were not discouraged by what seemed to be overwhelming odds against them, because they were determined that the people's cause for national emancipation could never be defeated.

We bore witness to the unspeakable genocide that descended on the people of Rwanda in 1994.

We know that, in the end, these extraordinary Africans ended the slaughter themselves because they took it upon themselves to make the determination that Africa will not perish at the hands of her own sons and daughters.

That same spirit of optimism and commitment to overcome must inform all of us now as we build on the victories we have scored, to engage what will clearly be a titanic struggle to achieve Africa's Renaissance.

What will decide the outcome is not the strength of our opponents but our own determination to succeed.

Stretching through the mists, for a millennium, our common African history is replete with great feats of courage, demonstrated by the heroes and heroines and the heroic peoples, without whose loyal attachment to hope and the vision of a bright future for Africa, her people would long have perished.

The moment is upon us when we should draw on this deep well of human nobility to make this statement in action - that Africa's time has come!

We, in all our millions, including those of us who are in the Diaspora, will ensure that Africa will not be denied what is due to her!

The African century will not be proclaimed! It will come to be through struggle!

The struggle continues! Victory is certain!

We wish the African Renaissance Institute success in the historic mission we are all called upon to carry out, to end a long and dark night without whose ending no human being anywhere in the world can claim to be fulfilled as a human being.

The only ailment that has no cure is the spawn of a curse.

I thank you for your attention.