

Address at the National Summit of Unity and Reconciliation in Rwanda

Kigali 19 October 2000

Your Excellency President Paul Kagame,
Your Excellency Prime Minister Bernard Makuza,
Honourable Ministers,
Distinguished Guests,
Brothers and Sisters of Rwanda,

We bring the greetings of the people of South Africa. The people of South Africa feel very close to Rwanda. We feel that the pain that you have suffered has been our pain as well. The progress you are making and the progress you must make to overcome a difficult past will benefit us as well. Therefore we come, amongst other things to convey our own best wishes for success in the important work in which you are engaged of achieving unity and reconciliation.

Thank you very much for offering me an opportunity to participate in this important process that is dealing with a critical matter of unity and reconciliation.

I am certain that this meeting will add to the already valiant efforts of the people of Rwanda to reconstruct Rwanda, to rebuild their communities and help the healing process of the souls of all Rwandans, both the victims of the barbaric act, as well as those guilty of the most grotesque genocide of our time.

We hope that out the tragedy of this nation, will emerge an outcome that will be a lesson to the rest of humanity about how to use a catastrophe such as this one to bring about reconciliation, unity, stability and development.

I am sure we all agree that the struggle for the complete emancipation of the African people from the shackles of colonialism and neo-colonialism has been the struggle to free ourselves from the past, to rid ourselves of the legacy of underdevelopment and dependency, to free ourselves from that past which had been declared dead through our independence movements on the continent and yet which continued to govern us and influence and shape our lives well into the present period.

This struggle for freedom has always been characterised as a struggle for national unity in the context of deep divisions stemming from the colonial past, divisions driven in good measure by a struggle for access to power and resources.

In the 1990's, the struggle for freedom has also been re-affirmed through a shared vision of African unity and solidarity, of African renewal and sustainable socio-economic development in an increasingly globalising world and a world economy from which Africa is in good measure marginalised.

It is through the support of African countries, and through the practice of African unity and solidarity that we, the South African people, could free ourselves from the tyranny of apartheid and establish a democracy.

The new wave of democracy sweeping the African continent is a further sign that the conditions are emerging for the African people to realise a life of prosperity and to achieve the rebirth of our continent.

There is, I believe, broad agreement that the development we desire so much for all African people can only happen when we end the conflicts and when we have peace permeating the entirety of our continent. And that a climate of sustained and enduring peace is a necessity, that stability coupled with strong democracies is a requirement, for the African continent to prosper and provide a better life for all her people.

It is in this spirit that I am pleased to be able to say a few words at this Unity and Reconciliation Summit. For a people to be truly free they must come to terms with the reality of their history in order to overcome its legacy. The full comprehension of the past is important because it assists all of us to arrive at common, national consensus of what needs to be done to build the future.

In that context I am join His Excellency, President Paul Kagame, in congratulating the Commission for the work it has done already to ensure that we as Rwandans grapple with our past openly, honestly so that we can rebuild.

As you are aware, we ourselves, in South Africa, continue to be engaged in a similar exercise of bringing unity and reconciliation to our country.

Although our situations are different, I am however confident that we can learn from one another and share experiences as we travel this common road of unity and reconciliation.

There was a time in our history when South Africa seemed to be on the path to self-destruction. Fortunately, we didn't get to that point. That point was avoided by conscious acts of men and women who thought it was important that something new should emerge out of that conflict ridden situation.

The organisation from which I come, the African National Congress is 88 years old this year. From its foundation, it has sought to end white minority rule in our country. It has sought to ensure that we will be a democratic, non-racial South Africa. It has sought to build a country of equals, of a people sharing a common patriotism. Even when some among us called for us to drive white people into the sea, the ANC resisted that demand because we believed that by an accident of history, South Africa had become a country of both black and white.

It was clear therefore that the only way that we could build this society of equals would be if indeed we achieved reconciliation amongst ourselves.

The possibility for that emerged during the middle 1980's as a result of the progress of the struggle both internally and externally. The conditions emerged so that we could begin the conscious process of getting together as black and white South Africans in search of that unity and reconciliation.

I hope that you will not mind if I say some things about this particular process without pretending in any way that it is an experience that can be replicated in Rwanda but it might be of some interest to you in your deliberations.

From the mid 1980's we spend a period of about 5 years in extensive interaction amongst the leadership of our people, both black and white. We had extensive discussions, ourselves as ANC with business leaders, religious leaders, leaders of newspapers, with people from the universities, trade unions, traditional leaders to expose one another to one another's aspirations, hopes and fears and naturally to influence one another.

It was a process of interaction during which we were looking at whether there were any possibilities for us as South Africans, some drawn from among the majority of oppressed and some from the minority oppressors, to see whether we could evolve a common view of the kind of South Africa that we needed. By the time negotiations began in 1990, this broad leadership had come to a common view of the kind of South Africa we wanted.

One of the things that was agreed was that clearly we were going to require a democratic constitution which would enjoy the support of the people of South Africa. The immediately posed a problem because such a constitution needed to be drafted and adopted by a body truly representative of South Africa.

But it was clear at that time, if we had elected a constitutional assembly, the white population of South Africa would have felt uneasy about that because they would not have known their role in the writing of the constitution.

We therefore decided that before we drafted the constitution, we negotiate together a set of constitutional principles within which even an elected constitutional assembly would then draft the constitution. That process succeeded to re-assure, especially the white minority in South Africa not to be afraid of democracy.

Like yourselves, we made provision for the formation of a Government of National Unity because it seemed clear to us that the former ruling party which represented an important part of our population, needed to feel part of the process of democratisation and removal of the legacy of racism.

We faced a similar problem as you. The UN had declared apartheid a crime against humanity. The logical conclusion therefore would have been that the perpetrators should be brought to justice. But it was clear that if democratisation led to retribution against those who had perpetrated the crime of apartheid – we would not have peace. Neither would we be able to, as South Africans, build a new society in the spirit of reconciliation.

The matter could not be ignored either. We decided that we needed to set up a Truth and Reconciliation Commission so that the truth of the crimes of apartheid could be told, so that all of us could get exposed to everything bad that had happened, so that in the recognition of that history, we knew what it was that we must not repeat.

We also agreed that as a result of that process, those that came forward to apply for amnesty, would be provided amnesty provided they met certain conditions.

Some would be denied amnesty for various reasons and therefore liable for prosecution. We also decided that you could not merely have the truth told and amnesty granted without addressing the matter of reparations to the victims of the crime of apartheid.

It has seemed to us as South Africans, that the TRC has indeed managed to take our country forward, where perpetrator and victim were able to face one another and confront the truth and were able to say, "I forgive you".

It became possible for people who had lost their loved ones to find out the truth about their disappearances. It became possible for people to exhume the bodies of their loved ones and rebury them with the traditional dignities of our society.

It became possible too, for people who were living with a great sense of guilt for the terrible things they had done, to shed themselves of their own sense of guilt. It became possible for them to place themselves in a situation where they could see themselves, not as people who had to hide a terrible past but as people who had been, in a sense, reborn to become part of the process of the reconstruction of the new South Africa.

Of course that hasn't ended the divisions of South African society. The work of the TRC, important as it has been has not resulted in the unity and reconciliation of our country. The divisions persist, the legacy of apartheid persist. It is therefore important that as we continue with that search for unity reconciliation, we address that legacy as well. We must therefore look at a twin process – one of reconciliation and one of transformation. It was quite clear that we could not achieve reconciliation without transformation. That transformation has to deal with, among other things:

- the continuing racial divisions of our country, which we are now addressing

- the question of poverty and the racial disparities in the distribution of wealth and income.
- Deep-seated gender discrimination which disadvantaged black women severely
- Ensuring that languages and cultures enjoy an equal status, where none is seen as superior over others.

In short, that continuing struggle for unity and reconciliation has also had to be a struggle for the transformation of our society. To address all of these matters so that we could give birth to a South Africa of equal citizens sharing a common patriotism.

None of this is easy.

Within the unity and reconciliation process, we've got to adopt programmes of affirmative action, to speed up the development of those who have been disadvantaged. Some fear that this process means that they will lose opportunities. The process is not easy. We had believed that it was important that all of us as a country should recognise the task of unity, reconciliation, transformation and of ending racism and gender discrimination. Reconciliation should itself serve as an instrument to drive a united process of transformation.

I am confident that some of these things you are already engaged in. I say these things about South Africa, not because these are transferable to Rwanda, but because we should share ideas and experiences.

It has been incumbent upon both our countries to ensure that the political conflicts of the past do not become an obstacle to future development and the deepening of democracy and democratic participation in our people's lives.

Our own experience, informs us that we should not treat the programme of unity and reconciliation as a separate and stand alone function of a particular committee that is divorced from the processes of reconstruction and development of our countries.

The process of unity and reconciliation must be at the centre of all our activities and programmes as we struggle to create a new reality.

We have used and are using the delivery of basic services and access to resources to build durable unity.

We do indeed need all of us, to work very hard to bring about the permanent peace and security that the people of South Africa and Rwanda desire.

We should also work together to ensure that there is peace in the Great Lakes Region and in southern Africa.

The international community in general and the Africans in particular, have a responsibility to help bring about this state of peace, stability and security.

Wherever conflicts continue to exist on our vast continent, the causes must be understood for what they really are, and the message should be clear that solutions must be found, because without those solutions we would not be able to meet the desperate challenges of our people, of children who want to go to school, of people who need to be in good health and who need food. Without those solutions, we will not be able to meet this desperate need to ensure that our continent's people are equal to all other people around the world.

The Rwanda experience should teach each and every one of us to work towards unity, to take individual and collective responsibility for building the kind of future which all our people on the continent need.

I have a sense that because of your experience and our experience, these two countries and these two people have a particular responsibility to our continent. None of us on this continent suffered the terrible genocide that you did. Nobody else on the continent suffered the terrible disaster of apartheid. Therefore we must succeed in overcoming the legacy which led to that genocide and all things that led to the apartheid crime against humanity.

And as we do those things together, Rwanda and South Africa will have something positive to give to the rest of the world. That positive thing, among other things would be that regardless of the pain we have suffered, our own sense of humanity says that we should not seek to visit pain on any other people.

I wish you well in your deliberations.

I thank you