

Toast Remarks on the occasion of the State Banquet in Honour of the President of Italy

13 March 2002

President Ciampi and Mrs. Ciampi,
Honourable Senator Alfredo Mantica and other members of the Italian delegation,
Former President de Klerk,
Hon Dr Buthelezi,
Ministers and Deputy Ministers,
Your Excellencies the Ambassadors,
Business leaders,
Distinguished Guests,
Ladies and Gentlemen:

We are honoured, Mr. President, that you and Mrs Ciampi accepted our invitation to pay a State Visit to South Africa. Since this is the first ever visit of an Italian Head of State to South African soil, we are especially pleased to have you with us as our guests.

We welcome you to the southernmost part of Africa. We trust that during your short stay you will experience the warmth and resilience of our people who have fought so hard to be free and who now are working even harder to make this country a winning nation.

As South Africans who are engaged in what we call with pride our African renaissance, we cannot but admire and draw strength from the history of your country and the revolutionary changes that came about as part of and as result of what we now call the Italian renaissance.

The South African people spent the greater part of the last century fighting against colonialism and apartheid, believing in the correctness of human dignity and equality for all the people of South Africa and an end to racism in the world. The outcome of that struggle, in which the Italian people participated vigorously, was the freedom of all our people, both black and white. This has placed our country in a position to make its own contribution towards renewal and progress in Africa as a whole.

It is in this context of the common success in South Africa and the aspirations of all of Africa's people that we feel so inspired that you come here as a brother and friend to us all. Like you, Mr President, our own actions are informed by our consciousness of the importance of solidarity, of the necessity of constructive engagement between North and South.

In this context, we are deeply appreciative of the critical the role that Italy has played and will continue to play for the betterment of Africa and the world.

Mr. President,

I vividly recall my visit to Rome last year and the most fruitful discussions we had on the eve of the G8 Summit in Genoa which Italy chaired. In many ways Genoa was a starting point for a new relationship between Africa and the industrialised North that would continue to be strengthened and enhanced later in Brussels, New York and Paris, and would result in a universal acceptance of the challenges and opportunities presented by the New Partnership for Africa's people (NEPAD).

Certainly, we must thank you, Mr. President, the Government and people of Italy for your support in this regard. With partners such as yourselves, with the government and people of Italy on our side, we cannot but succeed in our endeavours.

We are pleased that Italy is among our top ten trade and investment partners and that in recent years there has been a steady growth in our bilateral economic relations.

In the development of our economy, we believe that we have much to learn from you. Among other things, the significant role of small and medium sized enterprises (SMMES) in the success of the Italian economy offers important lessons for us.

We have benefited immensely from development cooperation between our two countries especially in the development of SMME's and are grateful for the substantial donation by the Italian government for higher education in South Africa during June 2001.

In the fields of science and technology we have also made great strides in our relations. Following the highly successful 1st Joint Commission on Science and Technology between South Africa and Italy and the various joint projects that were initiated, the stage is now set for us to deepen our cooperation in these important areas.

We do not forget that while we meet here, the science and technology seminar with Italian and South African participants that is also taking place here in Cape Town also serves to bring us closer to one another in scientific cooperation.

The cultural agreement, which was signed earlier today, will further strengthen our cultural ties and encourage creative exchanges in the fields of arts, culture, education and sport.

Our country has a vibrant Italian community whose economic contribution in the motor industry, in engineering, as highly skilled artisans, shopkeepers, farmers, among others, continues to be important for the welfare and prosperity of this new nation.

I am reminded too that one of the largest Allied Prisoner-of-War Camps of the Second World War was located at Zonderwater outside Pretoria, which accommodated close to 100 000 people. During these times of hardship and suffering, the Italian prisoners completed many projects and after the war repatriation commenced, about 800 Italian prisoners were allowed to stay and almost 20 000 ex-prisoners returned within a few years.

The Zonderwater experience is an example of how suffering can also give birth to a new struggle for unity, for a people striving for a common humanity, and for a desire to be at one with the land and people that once imprisoned them.

In many ways, the experience of black South Africans has been one of imprisonment in the land of their birth and the struggle for freedom was for a wholly new relationship between different people and between nations. We will not forget the contribution of your country to our liberation struggle, and especially the outstanding assistance and people of Regio Emilia to our movement.

In the wake of globalisation and the rapid changes in the world economy, I believe, that we have no choice but to embark on a new way forward, on a wholly new relationship between peoples, countries and continents, so as to end world poverty, and for the sake of world peace and prosperity.

In this regard, we are very pleased to have Italy as a partner in the implementation of the bilateral agreement between our country and the European Union. We also look forward to our cooperation during the WTO trade negotiations, as defined by the Doha decisions. We also look forward to working together with you at both the important Financing for Development Conference in Mexico next week and the critically important Johannesburg World Summit for Sustainable Development later this year.

In the aftermath of the heinous terrorist attack in New York and Washington on September 11 last year, the world community is faced with the urgent necessity to join hands in the struggle against terrorism.

The nations of the world need to establish a new relationship among themselves, one that must be characterised by the narrowing of the distances that divide us. As part of this historic process, we recognise the short stretch of seawater between Africa and Europe, as a meeting place in which together we can think, dream and act out a new reality, embarking on a new journey for the peoples of Italy, of South Africa, and the world.

Your Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen:

It is therefore with great pleasure that I ask you to rise and drink a toast to His Excellency, President Ciampi, to the friendship between our peoples and the realisation of our dream of African renewal.

I thank you.