

Statement at the Launch of the National Action Plan for Protection and Promotion of Human Rights on International Human Rights Day

10 December 1998

Honorable Ministers
Premiers
MEC's
Ambassadors
Members of the Diplomatic Corps
Ladies and Gentlemen

Today is the 50th anniversary of the universal declaration of human rights.

In Paris on 10th December 1948 men and women from all parts of the world, from diverse backgrounds and cultures, came together to give all of human kind new hope and a new vision for the future.

After five years of slaughter on the battlefields of the world, where human kind was once again reduced to barbarism, the human spirit rallied to map out a new course for humanity.

Article one of the universal declaration boldly stated: "all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood.

But while the dark clouds of war were settling, ominous ideological differences were already beginning to emerge which would see the world in the throes of a "Cold War" for many more decades.

In Africa it was to take many more years before the shackles of colonial rule would be broken.

And in our own country, in the same year that the world recognised the "inherent dignity and the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family", another form of barbarism began to take root.

Centuries of colonialism and decades of racial segregation culminated in the entrenchment of the system of apartheid. A brutal and vicious system of social engineering based on untrammled racism, which the United Nations would in time declare a crime against humanity.

Measured in terms of the life-span of our universe 50 years is a flickering of the eye. But measured in terms of the history of our world, these 50 years will perhaps be recorded as the most momentous of our century.

Notwithstanding the many problems which our world still faces, not for one moment forgetting the many ongoing wars and conflicts, not least in our own continent, never for a second becoming complacent about the grinding poverty which characterises the lives of countless numbers of people all over our planet and never turning a blind eye to the daily violations of human rights which still occur, we can with confidence say that the world is becoming a better place for all to live in.

The planet is no longer divided into an East and a West. The African continent is no longer subject to colonial rule. And herein our own country we have a non-racial democratic government.

The language of human rights is indeed becoming a universal language and it is increasingly becoming the standard against which the world judges countries and countries judge the world.

It is easy to appreciate therefore why the 50th anniversary of the universal declaration of human rights has such a special significance for us here in South Africa.

Because of the determined struggle of our people for their human dignity, instead of the former oppressors celebrating 50 years of apartheid rule, we are celebrating with the rest of the world four years of our new, non-racial and democratic society as a free people.

Our national action plan for the protection and promotion of human rights correctly celebrates our achievements since our first non-racial democratic election. Government is indeed proud of what it has accomplished.

But our national action plan is also a sober reminder for all of us of what still has to be done before all our people can enjoy, fully, all the fundamental freedoms and human rights in our Constitution and our Bill of Rights.

As we celebrate the 50th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights let us not forget therefore the poor, the homeless, the jobless, the victims of crime and the vulnerable.

As the new millennium approaches let us indeed strive to make real our commitment of "all human rights for all". Let us rededicate ourselves to ensuring that the wretched of the earth become the real inheritors of our new culture of human rights.

This is the pledge that our government makes to all of our people and to the international community.

On behalf of government and the people of South Africa, I now hand over our national action plan for the protection and promotion of human rights to the United Nations representative, Mr David Whaley.

I thank you.