

Toast remarks in honour of His Excellency, The President of The Palestinian National Authority, Mahmoud Abbas

Tuynhuys, Cape Town: 31 March 2006

Your Excellency, President Mahmoud Abbas, and honourable members of your delegation,
Your Excellencies, Ministers and Deputy Ministers, Madame Speaker and Deputy Speaker,
The Honourable Premier of the Western Cape, Ebrahim Rasool,
Your Excellencies, Ambassadors and Members of the Diplomatic Corps,
Our religious leaders,
Distinguished guests,
Ladies and gentlemen:

We are indeed highly honoured that Your Excellency, President Mahmoud Abbas, has paid us a state visit to consolidate the excellent relations and deep friendship between the peoples of Palestine and South Africa.

I am pleased to use this occasion to convey the warmest welcome of the government and people of South Africa to you, Your Excellency, and your delegation, and through you, to convey our fraternal greetings to the Palestinian Authority and the people of Palestine.

Your Excellency, this visit is very special to all of us because for many decades both our peoples have occupied the same trenches, and shared similar experiences and anxieties in our quest for freedom and independence.

Naturally, the people of South Africa follow events in Palestine passionately because of this close bond of friendship and comradeship.

Accordingly, that brief moment that was rich with positive possibilities, is still etched in our minds, when two great warriors on the opposite sides - Yitzhak Rabin and Yasser Arafat -embraced the prospects of a just and permanent peace.

Unfortunately, the cruel finger of the assassin tragically postponed the dawn of an historic moment that would have silenced the deadly guns and bombs and brought to an end the prolonged suffering of the sister people of Palestine.

Your Excellency, we recall this moment because it is our fervent belief that what that great leader and comrade, Yasser Arafat, called 'the peace of the brave', was not necessarily lost and buried with the mortal remains of both warrior antagonists, Yitzhak Rabin and Yasser Arafat.

This we say because we emerged from a similar situation of over 350 years of oppression, brutal repression, massacres, uprooting of millions of Africans and the general treatment of the natives of this land as something less than human beings, to enter our own 'peace of the brave', whence we embarked on another challenging road of building a united, democratic, non-racial, non-sexist society.

Indeed, Your Excellency, having conducted a titanic struggle for freedom, like our brothers and sisters in Palestine, we reached a moment at which we had to make difficult choices as it became clear that the guns and bombs that for many years advanced our struggle for liberation would soon turn into obstacles blocking the advance to the same freedom for which we fought.

Seizing the moment to engage in our own 'peace of the brave' we knew that the progress of the people of this country, black and white, towards peace, development and prosperity, could not be postponed because of the lack of will, on both sides of the divide, to continue inflicting pain on one another.

I am convinced Your Excellency that both the peoples of Palestine and Israel desire peace. With the elections in Palestine and Israel now concluded, it is our hope that negotiations will resume without much delay, within the context of previous agreements and the Road Map that was elaborated by the Quartet.

We are convinced, Your Excellency, that there is no other road to peace between Palestine and Israel except the road of negotiations to arrive at a mutually acceptable solution. In this regard, it is perfectly obvious that unilateral action can never produce a permanent solution, but would only serve to complicate an already difficult situation.

As in the past, Your Excellency, the government and people of South Africa are ready to offer whatever support they can towards the goal of creating an independent State of Palestine existing side by side and in conditions of peace with the State of Israel.

Like other nations, we remain deeply concerned about the situation in the Middle East as a whole and support all initiatives directed at achieving peace throughout the region. We are convinced that the conclusion of an equitable agreement between Palestine and Israel would make a fundamental contribution to the realisation of this important goal.

We are convinced that the leaders of both Palestine and Israel have the wisdom and capacity to seize this moment to bring lasting peace to their peoples, and thus make an enormous contribution to peace and stability throughout the Middle East as well.

Your Excellency, we entered into full diplomatic relations in 1995. Since then we have concluded important agreements especially in the spheres of diplomacy, education and health.

Clearly, together, we need to ensure that we implement these agreements and look further into other areas of cooperation so that we are better able to cooperate for the benefit of our peoples.

Once more, welcome Mr President, dear brother and friend. I would like to assure you that when you are in this country you are among genuine friends who pray daily that soon your heroic people will regain their statehood, that soon they will be blessed with the gift of living in a peaceful and friendly neighbourhood.

As you leave us tomorrow, we would like you, Your Excellency, to carry a message to the people of Palestine that here they have brothers and sisters who are ready to accompany them on the road to peace, however long that road may be and however difficult it may be.

The millions of our people look forward to that great day when it will be said that, at last, the enormously talented peoples of Palestine and Israel have arrived at an historic agreement acceptable to both sides.

Your Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen:

Please rise and join me in a toast to the good health, peace and prosperity of His Excellency, President Mahmoud Abbas, and to the continuing solidarity and friendship between the wonderful peoples of Palestine and South Africa. To solidarity and friendship!