

**ADDRESS TO THE INTERNATIONAL  
LABOUR CONFERENCE**

*Geneva, June 8, 1990*

Distinguished President of the International Labour Conference,  
Director-General of the ILO,

Honourable delegates and observers:

It is a matter of great honour to us that we are able to address this august body, which is one of the most representative institutions within the United Nations system. We thank you most sincerely for your invitation which we believe was inspired by your commitment to the struggle to end the evil system of apartheid.

We bring you the greetings of the National Executive Committee of our organisation, the African National Congress. Our President, Comrade Oliver Tambo, our membership, the Mass Democratic Movement of our country and the masses of our people as a whole, as before, all of us look forward to the results of your deliberations, convinced that you will take new measures which will assist us to move forward rapidly towards our emancipation.

We must, however, in the first instance express our deepest appreciation to you all for the struggle you have waged over the years for the release of all South African political prisoners. It is thanks to these efforts that I am able to speak to you today. It will be thanks to your efforts that the remaining political prisoners will be released, hopefully in the near future.

Let us assure you that despite the thickness of the prison walls, all of us on Robben Island and other jails could hear your voices

demanding our release very clearly. We drew inspiration from this. I knew from the very first day of our incarceration that in the end it would prove impossible for the apartheid system to keep us in its dungeons. We thank you that you refused to forget us. We thank you that you did not tire in your struggle. We thank you for your sense of humanity and your commitment to justice which drove you to reject the very idea that we should be imprisoned and that our people should be in bondage.

### **Apartheid can no longer be sustained**

It seems clear today that the road we still have to travel to arrive at the liberation of our people is not too long. The masses of our people are confident that victory is in sight. Our own liberation from prison is taken as a signal that the people will soon liberate themselves from the larger prison represented by the apartheid system. Indeed, the times have changed.

I remember distinctly the arrogant bearing of the captains of the apartheid system when they took power 42 years ago, convinced that they were the elect of God. They went about their business of perpetrating a crime against humanity with unequalled determination, brutality and confidence. They moved forward towards their goal like a juggernaut, crushing everything in their way, ever ready with clever words to present their criminal venture as the very epitome of civilised behaviour. In the end, of course, they became slaves to the goddess of violence and war, and even as they massacred they found words to justify their action and took action to punish even the dead as transgressors of their criminal law.

Nobody knows how many are dead that should have been alive. Nobody knows how many children have died in the last 40 years simply because the apartheid system denied them food and good health. None can tell how many bodies lie strewn across southern Africa, the victims of a merciless campaign of repression within South Africa and Namibia, of aggression and destabilisation in the rest of our region.

Today, those who have imposed themselves on us as our Government openly admit that their grand design has failed. They

say the system of white minority rule must come to an end. The apartheid system can no longer be sustained. Those who were imprisoned have had to be released. Those who were driven into exile shall return to the country of their birth. Those who were condemned to a position of slavery shall be masters of their destiny. The tragedy is that those who were killed by the apartheid system cannot be resurrected.

Today we speak with hope about the prospects of ending the apartheid system. These constitute a tribute to the millions of our people who refused to succumb to tyranny, who refused to fear death, who refused to be enslaved. It is thanks to their courage and heroism that the apartheid system can no longer be sustained. It is also thanks to the courage and heroism of the peoples of southern Africa as a whole, who not only fought for their own emancipation but also refused to be terrorised, to accept the perpetuation of the apartheid system.

History will surely recall that there are very few other issues which united humanity as much as did the opposition of the nations to the apartheid crime against humanity. The actions that the international community took to express its revulsion against this crime are part of the equation of struggle which has taken us to the moment of hope and confidence which we have reached today. In this context, we would like to take this opportunity to salute the ILO for its enormous contribution to our common struggle. The actions you took which resulted in the withdrawal of South Africa from the ILO a quarter of a century ago, and what you have done since then, are important elements in the common efforts of all humanity to isolate and by this means destroy the system of apartheid.

### **Obstacles to negotiations**

And so, where are we today? The situation suggests that it would be possible for our people, through their political representatives, to enter into negotiations for the transformation of South Africa into a united, democratic and non-racial country. But for this to happen, a climate conducive to negotiations has to be created. As you know, on the initiative of the ANC, we met President de Klerk and his

colleagues in Cape Town at the beginning of last month. The purpose of that meeting was to address the issue of the removal of the obstacles that stood in the way of the process of negotiations. At the end of the meeting, we were happy to announce that agreement had been reached on the removal of all the obstacles that we have identified, and which the rest of the world has also recognised as obstacles that needed to be removed.

We are encouraged that even yesterday President de Klerk announced the lifting of the state of emergency over the greater part of the country, as well as the release of another group of political prisoners. These steps constitute part of the process of implementing what was agreed a month ago. Of course, more will have to be done to ensure that the agreement is implemented in full. We are confident that this will be done and it should be done as a matter of urgency. As was agreed in Cape Town, we shall continue to press for this result.

We are confident that you will therefore persist in your demands that all political prisoners must be released, political trials ended, the exiles returned, repressive legislation repealed, and the state of emergency ended in its entirety. We make these points not to question the bona fides of the leadership of the South African Government. Indeed, we have said it in the past and believe it to be true that President de Klerk and his colleagues are men and women of integrity. We accepted their good faith that they will abide by what was agreed. But until what was agreed has been done, we cannot afford to lower our guard in the belief that the promise has become reality.

Indeed, we should make the point here that not everybody in our country has as yet accepted that a negotiated resolution of our problems is the best way forward. There are many among our white compatriots who are determined to resist change, arms in hand. The continuing violence of the police against unarmed people is the tip of the iceberg which illustrates the dangers we face from those who are committed to the perpetuation of white privilege and domination.

We must, in this context, also mention the continuing senseless carnage that is taking place in the Province of Natal. We have made it very clear to the Government that they must discharge their responsibility and end this violence. We, for our part, will continue to do everything in our power to solve this problem by peaceful means, whatever the obstacles in our way. We would like to take this opportunity to urge you to support the international campaign initiated by our democratic movement, to draw attention to this situation and to generate the necessary pressure to oblige the South African Government to end the killing of our people. You should know that there are at present in this hall representatives of our major trade union federation, COSATU, who have come out in part to take up this issue of Natal violence.

### **Democratic perspectives**

With the removal of the obstacles to negotiation, it would then be possible to bring all the representatives of political forces in the country together, to agree on all the necessary measures which would lead to the elaboration and adoption of a democratic constitution. In this regard, we would like to inform you that, more than ever before, the ANC is determined to ensure the broadest possible unity of all those within our country who are opposed to apartheid and are in favour of a genuine democratic transformation. We believe that these forces should act together in the interest of a speedy advance toward the creation of a non-racial democracy.

Central to the democratic perspective is, of course, the principle of one person one vote, on a common, non-racial voters' roll. We believe this to be fundamental to any democratic system. We are, however, also aware that many of our white compatriots fear change, but we also know that no permanent, just and stable resolution can ever be arrived at if a new political system continues to entrench white privilege simply because white South Africa is afraid of losing its privileged position.

Our policy is clear: that every South African citizen should have the right to his language, culture and religion. We are also committed to the view that the new democratic constitutional

arrangement should include an entrenched bill of rights, which should be justiciable and which would be monitored by an independent judiciary. We are convinced that measures such as these, as well as others, including the institution of a democratic system of regional and local government, are sufficient to guarantee the democratic rights of all our people, without discrimination based on race, colour, sex or creed.

It is equally obvious that serious measures would also have to be taken to address the issue of ensuring that our economy benefits all our people.

As you all know, millions of our people are condemned to a life of misery and deprivation, without food, housing, clothing, education, jobs and access to health care. At the same time, others live opulent lives.

While not seeking to impoverish anybody, quite clearly we have to address the issue of those who are deprived with the greatest vigour. In this context, we wish to make this undertaking: that the new South Africa will have to ratify the Conventions that the ILO has adopted over the decades, to ensure that the humane purposes intended by the promulgation of those Conventions are realised in our country as well.

### **Sanctions must be maintained**

We have tried, very briefly, to indicate some of our perspectives concerning what we are struggling to achieve in our country. What we have spoken of in terms of the political and economic system is still in the future. Today's reality is that the apartheid system, in all its principal elements, is still in place. We are still ruled by a white minority Government. Millions of our people are still confined in bantustans and other group areas. In other words, fundamental change has not yet taken place. The struggle must therefore continue.

In this respect, we wish to emphasise that it is our firm belief that sanctions must be maintained. Sanctions were imposed as a peaceful means to end apartheid. Given the fact that apartheid has

not ended, it is only logical that we should continue to use this weapon of struggle.

As we have indicated, we are of course very conscious of the need to develop the South African economy so that it is able to provide for the needs of all our people. This is going to require massive international intervention if we are to move forward at a pace that recognises the urgency of the needs of our people. What this emphasises is that there is every need to move as rapidly as possible to end the system of apartheid, so that the need for sanctions falls away.

Last December, a special session of the United Nations General Assembly decided unanimously that sanctions would not be lifted until profound and irreversible changes had taken place, leading to the transformation of South Africa into a non-racial democracy.

No such changes have as yet taken place. It is therefore important that the international community maintain its positions on the issue of sanctions.

### **Need for continued international assistance**

But clearly, we must also begin to look to the future. South Africa will be free. Peace will reign supreme in our region, despite the stubborn resistance of some elements to the peace initiatives of the Governments of Angola and Mozambique. When we have cleared these remnants of a cruel and inhuman past, then it will be time to attend to the matter of the reconstruction of our country and region to meet the material and spiritual needs of all our people.

Many years ago now the General Assembly of the United Nations took the decision that it had a special responsibility towards the people of South Africa. It adopted this position because it recognised the unique manner in which the scourge of racism had established itself in our country. By assuming a special responsibility, it was expressing the view that the elimination of the apartheid system of racial arrogance and supremacy was critical to the elimination of racism everywhere. We believe that even after the political transformation that we all seek has been achieved, this special responsibility of the international community will continue to be relevant. This is so because it will be necessary to repair the

damage caused by the apartheid system, both in South Africa and in the rest of southern Africa.

It will be important to ensure that within South Africa, as in Germany after the Second World War, the necessary democratic institutions are put in place so that racial tyranny does not raise its ugly head again.

We are going to require your continued political and material assistance with regard to all these matters as well as our continuing struggle. I think we are safe in assuming that the ILO will not fail us. I say this because you have already established a tradition of assistance to and cooperation with us, which we are certain will continue. We are obliged to you for the assistance you have given us with regard to the training of our trade unionists as well as some of our skilled personnel. In this regard we would also like to extend our thanks to you for the assistance you have extended to our democratic trade union movement, which made it possible for them to reach an agreement with the South African employers to change the repressive Labour Relations Act. We now await government action on this matter so that this important agreement is translated into law.

We want to build a system of cooperation with all nations so that the liberated South Africa itself becomes a force of peace, friendship and social progress throughout the world. We believe that our people of all colours, with all their talents and genius, have an important contribution to make to the realisation of this universal objective. This once more underlines the urgency with which we have to move to get rid of the apartheid system which makes this international intercourse impossible.

Mr. President, and dear friends, thank you very much for receiving us with such warmth. Thank you very much for listening to us with such kind attention. Let us walk the last mile together. Let us together turn into reality the glorious vision of a South Africa free of racism. Free of racial antagonisms among our people. No longer a threat to peace. No longer the skunk of the world. Our common victory is certain.