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All clear for negotiations?

Political journalist **HENNIE SERFONTEIN** reviews the state of play.

THE ROAD to an all-party conference in the near future and the subsequent drafting of a constitution for a new South Africa is now wide open, the basic obstacles to "real negotiations" having been effectively removed.

Already the two key parties in the process are said to have reached an unofficial "understanding" on how to overcome the two major obstacles facing the all-party conference — the ANC's demand for a constituent assembly and an interim government.

Furthermore, the government has apparently moved considerably in its understanding of the ANC's internal problems, specifically as regards the importance of addressing the negative perceptions of ANC supporters about negotiations.

The accord reached between the government and the ANC in Cape Town on

February 6 has effectively ended the deadlock that existed between them since the Pretoria Minute was signed early in August last year.

The controversial Article 3 of the Pretoria Minute, dealing with the "suspension of armed action and related activities" by the ANC, led to conflicting interpretations and caused a six-month stalemate in the release of political prisoners and return of exiles.

Both sides made important concessions. The

ANC agreed to stop "war talk" and refrain from new underground military activity. The government on its part accepted the right of the ANC to peaceful mass protest actions.

Agreement was reached that the release of political prisoners and the return of exiles, following indemnification, could proceed. This means that the "ultimatum" of the ANC's consultative conference in December has been met. It called for agreement on the "prisoners and

exiles" process to be completed and implementation to start before April 30 — also the date agreed upon in the Pretoria Minute.

In practice, of course, the return of exiles will be a long-drawn-out process taking many months.

Looking back on the negotiation process which began on February 2 last

year, but more particularly at the events of the past three months, it can only be described as the political miracle of modern times.

As the most crucial aspect of the whole process took place quickly and mostly behind the scenes, it was conducive to intimate personal relationships. Understanding and mutual respect has developed on both sides, despite



President De Klerk and Nelson Mandela: a tandem operation securing negotiations.

Confusion en route to perfect ending

By Sue Valentine

THE transition in South Africa epitomises the perfection of ends and the confusion of means.

It was with this paraphrase of Albert Einstein that Idasa policy and planning director Van Zyl Slabbert opened a 10-lecture programme on "Issues in Transition" hosted jointly by the institute and the University of Cape Town's Summer School.

Sketching his analysis of the chances for a transition to democracy in South Africa, Slabbert said *the* issue was that of white minority domination. In terms of this, there was a tendency to adopt the decolonisation agenda when speaking about solving this problem.

"But, this perspective is not valid for South Africa because in other situations whites left the country or some sort of external formula was imposed. These two modes are not available to us," said Slabbert.

In South Africa there was no clear political script to follow; problems would have to be solved "along the way".

He said that, by and large, everyone in South Africa believed negotiations were a good thing, but there were numerous interpretations of what negotiation meant.

Slabbert distinguished between the process of normalisation with which the government was busy at present and the process of democratisation.

Normalisation included the creation of space for political expression, restoring basic rights to all citizens and creating a climate conducive to negotiation.

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serious differences and often sharp public criticism of one another.

"The personal chemistry that has evolved between us is far more important than all the formal agreements and differences," a key cabinet minister recently remarked. Thus in a recent edition of *Vrye Weekblad* several senior cabinet ministers are quoted as speaking with the greatest respect of Nelson Mandela as "a gentleman, a man of integrity and honesty".

Thus the general public will be astonished to know that privately the ANC accepts the honesty and good intentions of Law and Order Minister Adriaan Vlok, although he is criticised for certain mistakes.

A turning point in getting the negotiation process firmly back on track again — after months of escalating confrontations — was the De Klerk-Mandela meeting at the end of November in Pretoria. It was then agreed that future meetings between the two and their advisers would take place in the utmost confidence, without any advance announcements which result in media hype and create a make or break crisis atmosphere.

But another development has been even more important: on the government's side a new understanding has developed of the ANC's internal problems, the perceptions of its supporters and the vital need to strengthen the position of Nelson Mandela and his negotiating team to counter grassroots criticism by providing them with viable and tangible results in the negotiations.

Speedy and drastic actions are planned in the spheres of education, housing and local government, which the ANC hopes will create black grassroots confidence in negotiations.

AS REGARDS the ANC's demands for an interim government and a constituent assembly, the January 8 ANC document and subsequent remarks by Mandela and De Klerk make it clear that there has already been, for many months, an unspoken official "understanding" about how to overcome it.

The ANC call for an all-party conference provides for the conference to be converted into an interim government and a constituent assembly, if confirmed by a general referendum.

De Klerk recognised the need for "the leaders of the negotiating parties" to have "a voice in the formulation of important policy decisions". Thus, as far as an interim government is concerned, the differences involve terminology, and not the substance.

The first informal meeting of leaders of the all-party conference could take place as early as April. Regardless of the rhetoric, the Conservative Party will attend. The PAC, the other hardline non-negotiator, will, if not participating, probably be present as an observer.

It seems that the Mandela leadership is fully in control of the negotiation process, notwithstanding the outspoken criticism by grassroots members at the December conference.

Mandela seems determined to keep his militant hardliners in check, and is not prepared to allow the strategy of mass mobilisation to get out of hand and to threaten the negotiations. □

HOPE & DESPAIR

Hopes and fears for the future

Prominent South Africans say what gives them hope for the year ahead — and what makes them despair.

WHAT WITH the war in the Gulf, seemingly no end to the violence in South Africa and our bleak economic prospects, one might be forgiven for feeling that the new year already looks a little threadbare. *Democracy in Action* asked several prominent South Africans what gave them hope and what made them despair.

Perhaps the most positive response came from Wits University's Prof Njabulo Ndebele who declined to comment on what made him despair: "I wouldn't want to use the word despair — I don't think it is a helpful way of responding, perhaps we should talk about major challenges."

Helen Suzman
Retired Democratic Party MP and civil rights campaigner offered three observations which gave her hope for South Africa's future.

"There is still a remarkable amount of goodwill between racial groups — it seems to be perennial. The negotiations stay on track despite all the obstacles and, most important, the majority of people in South Africa of all races want to live a life free from intimidation, with the prospects of a better standard of living. Of course, this can only be obtained if we have stability."

Two issues were cause for greatest concern — the continuing violence and the ANC's "obstinacy" on the ending of sanctions.

"Neither Mandela nor Inkatha seem able to control the ongoing violence, largely because elements (such as criminals or people wanting revenge) have entered into it.

"The ANC remain obstinate on the issue of sanctions when they know perfectly well they won't solve anything unless we get the economy sparked up and end the violence."

Gcina Mhlope
Playwright, director, storyteller, actor

"I am encouraged that there are enough people in South Africa who want things to be different and to be better. These people are not just in full time politics but are working at other levels — in schools, as social workers, and so on.

"But what depresses me is the economy. The way it's going is terrifying. There is no such thing as independence when you don't have money. And then there's the homelessness of black people. Where is it going? These are huge problems.

"When I look at the education in this country I also worry like crazy. The amount of work that is needed there is incredible. I hope that the little I'm doing in children's stories and theatre is giving some inspiration to those children I'm involved with, but the only recipe to get anywhere is hard work."

Ken Owen
Editor, *Sunday Times*

"Things are going about as well as any realistic person might have expected them to. I think it is more than we dared hope for in 1986/87.

"Both sides are committed to negotiations; the NP have moved their policy position light years and are providing good, even admirable leadership. The ANC has modified its position, perhaps less so, but in the face of greater difficulties. The meeting between Mandela and Buthelezi was a milestone in the process.

"Still, I am terribly distressed by the social disintegration of the black community. Perhaps it was

to have been expected, but I didn't imagine it would be so awful.

"The only answer is political negotiations and revived economic performance. If I came to the conclusion that our economic prospects were broken, then I would despair indeed."

Sheena Duncan
Vice-president of the South African Council of Churches and a member of the committee coordinating the return of exiles.

"What makes me despair is the slowness of the whole process of the return of exiles. Bureaucratic structures and difficult guidelines are complicating the process. One of the requirements for indemnity, for example, is that the individual concerned must admit to his or her crime and that this must be published in the *Government Gazette!*

"On the positive side, amendments to the



Helen Suzman



Gcina Mhlope