

NELSON ROLIHLEHLA Mandela has been "inside" for 23 years. For the past two years Mandela, now 67 years old, has been in Cape Town's Robben Island prison with Walter Sisulu, Govan Mbeki, Ahmed Kathrada and Elias Motsoaledi.

They have been inside for longer than tens of thousands of their supporters across the country have been alive.

Mandela was born in Umtata in the Transkei in 1918 into the royal Tembu household.

He attended a mission school, and there he was introduced to another world: he was shocked to find that the history books recognised only white heroes, describing blacks as savages and cattle thieves, and referring to the wars between the amaXhosa and the British as the 'Kaffir Wars'.

In 1930 Mandela's father became seriously ill and the young Nelson was taken to the Paramount Chief. His father said, "I am giving you this my servant, Rolihlahla. This is my only son. I can say from the way he speaks to his sisters and friends that his inclination is to help the nation."

After graduating from Healdtown, Mandela went to Fort Hare in 1938. There he met Oliver Tambo, but their friendship was cut short when Mandela was suspended from the college. As a member of the SRC, he had joined a protest boycott after the authorities reduced the SRC's powers. He was among those suspended as a result.

When his uncle tried to persuade him to abandon the boycott and continue his studies, Mandela decided it was time to leave the Transkei.

Another reason was that without consulting, Mandela's uncle had chosen a wife for him. It was all part of his uncle's plans for Mandela to take over the chieftainship. But Mandela was determined never to rule over an oppressed people.

At the age of 22, he left for Johannesburg.

For a short time he worked on the mines as a policeman, but soon resigned, and went to live in Alexandra. A friend there suggested he meet a certain Walter Sisulu, and with Sisulu's backing, Mandela went on to finish the degree he'd abandoned at Fort Hare.

Sisulu also arranged for him to begin work as a clerk in a law firm in Johannesburg while he began studying law, part-time, at Wits University.

A new force was emerging within the ANC at that time, grouped around a militant and determined circle of students and friends.

Sisulu was already a member of the ANC, and part of this circle, and he encouraged his friends, Mandela and Oliver Tambo — now teaching in Johannesburg — to join.

They rallied support for more militant youth action within the Congress and met with ANC president A.B. Xuma to discuss their position. These talks led to the formation of the ANC Youth League in April 1944.

Mandela was a founder member of the Youth League where he began to play an increasingly central role, as he did in the ANC as a whole.

The strike in 1946 by 100 000 black mine workers had implications far beyond the mines and the trade union movement: it stimulated crucial developments within the Youth League. Members had originally united around the need for Africans to organise themselves exclusively.

But, national support work for the strike put them in direct contact with other groups in the struggle against racism and exploitation. The unions were largely led by Communist party members, some of whom were white with unques-

Mandela - the man no prison can silence



tionable commitment and dedication.

Ideological differences began to emerge within the Youth League. In place of the narrow nationalism of some of the members, many, like Mandela, Tambo and Sisulu, began to reject this, and called for a nationalism that organised and united all democratic groups against both racial discrimination and economic exploitation. Their's was a call for action.

The ANC "Programme of action" adopted at its congress in 1949, clearly reflected the assertiveness of the YL. It called for an end to all segregated political institutions, to be achieved by boycotts, strikes, civil disobedience and non co-operation.

James Moroka was elected president and he was joined on the executive by a new generation of leaders like Sisulu, Moses Kotane and Dan Tloome.

Mandela was elected Youth League president in 1950. The Youth League remained an important grouping in the decade of widespread resistance that followed particularly in the 1954 education boycott against the Bantu Education Act. It was largely responsible for organising teachers to provide alternate classes for boycotting students.

Shortly after being elected Transvaal president of the ANC, he was

appointed national volunteer-in-chief of the 1952 Defiance Campaign against unjust laws — which focussed on a rejection of the pass laws.

His work involved touring nationally, and speaking at house meetings with volunteers throughout the country. His task was to inspire people with the confidence to overcome their oppression, through a direct and non-violent challenge to the government.

This work led to his arrest, along with many thousands of others who took up the campaign, and he was charged with furthering the aims of communism. Mandela, Moroka, Sisulu and others were given suspended sentences.

At the ANC's congress at the end of 1952, Albert Lutuli was elected president-general of the ANC, and Mandela his deputy. Both were immediately banned, as were more than 100 ANC, Indian Congress and trade union organisers.

Mandela was banned from attending all meetings, and was confined to Johannesburg for six months. Yet he continued working behind the scenes: his 1953 address to the ANC's congress was read for him by someone else.

That same year his ban was extended, and laid down that he must resign officially from the ANC and attend no gatherings for five

years.

From this time on — except for the Treason trial years when the ANC leaders were together most of the time — his leadership was exercised almost in secret.

In an effort to decentralise and strengthen ANC organisation, he oversaw the implementation of the M-plan, which aimed to build mass membership through organising at grassroots level and which, through a hierarchy of leaders at intermediate levels, would be responsive to direction without the necessity of public meetings.

The branches — which had grown rapidly during the Defiance Campaign — would now be divided into cells at street level. Seven street cells would make a 'zone' and a representative from each zone would unite with four others in a 'ward'. Ward representatives would then form a further committee, which would administer the ANC in each township.

In 1955 the national executive commented that not enough work had been done to implement the plan. Mass meetings and large public activities were all very well — but house-to-house work, education, and the building of small local branches was just as important, they said.

Mandela, meanwhile, had set up a legal practice with Oliver Tambo. It was not easy — apart from his other

commitments, the Transvaal Law Society tried to stop him practising as a lawyer.

He resisted this attempt, and at one point during the marathon Treason Trial of 1956-60 he was part of the defence team.

In 1960 a State of Emergency was declared. Heavy repression followed and the ANC was banned. Meetings were disrupted and it was many months before leaders could come together nationally to discuss a way forward.

In March 1961 a national All-in African conference was held in Maritzburg. Mandela's banning order had just expired, and he was able to make his first public speech since 1952.

He discussed plans to campaign for a national convention which would take the form of a three day stayaway: the last day would coincide with SA's proclamation of a republic on May 31, 1961.

If the ultimatum to the government was ignored, a campaign of 'mass non-cooperation' would follow. The newly formed National Action Committee of which Mandela was secretary, would supervise arrangements.

Mandela went underground after the conference, to begin organising for the stayaway and to evade charges of incitement.

During this period Mandela and his comrades met to consider what must be done now that the ANC was banned. They considered themselves confronted by two options — to submit or fight. In the end they opted for armed struggle. Out of that meeting Umkhonto we Sizwe was formed — with Mandela as its first Commander in Chief.

For seventeen months he evaded capture. He slipped out of South Africa and made a dramatic tour of independent Africa. He addressed a conference of the Pan-African Freedom Movement of East, Central and Southern Africa at Addis Ababa in January 1962.

While outside he received brief training in an Algerian Military camp.

On August 5, 1962 he was arrested and in November was convicted on two charges: leaving the country illegally and incitement.

He was given a five year sentence.

A year later many of his colleagues were arrested in Rivonia, on the edge of Johannesburg. Mandela was taken from prison and made to stand trial as a member of the Umkhonto We Sizwe High Command.

His statement from the dock received worldwide publicity. Along with Walter Sisulu, Govan Mbeki and others, he admitted that he was guilty of sabotage but denied that a decision had been taken to begin guerilla activity.

Nelson Mandela was sentenced to life imprisonment.

For 20 years he had been at the centre of South African politics as a charismatic and enterprising leader. But Mandela the prisoner soon became as much a problem to the authorities as Mandela the activist at large.

Local, national and international campaigns are being waged to demand his release.

Mandela has rejected 'with the contempt they deserve' plans to release him with restrictions on his movement, as well as offers to free him on condition that he renounces violence.

The Release Mandela Campaign has this to say:

"Along with the release of Mandela must come the return of exiles; the unbanning of the ANC; the release of political detainees; the repeal of apartheid laws and the demobilisation of security forces.

"Only then will a national convention be possible to secure a future of peace and democracy in SA."