

# Mandela, S. African businessmen come together at site of 1980 bombing

February 06, 1994|By Michael Hill | Michael Hill,Johannesburg Bureau of The Sun

SASOLBURG, South Africa -- When Elmore Marshall stood up to introduce Nelson Mandela to a hastily arranged breakfast for this town's business community, it was yet another indication that a new South Africa is emerging from the turmoil of the old.

Mr. Marshall is general manager of the Sasol plant in this company town. The huge complex is the result of this state-owned oil company investing millions of dollars to produce petroleum products from locally mined coal in order to protect the country during the years of international sanctions.

During the decades that Mr. Mandela's African National Congress (ANC) and its armed wing Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK) waged an armed struggle against the white government and its system of apartheid, one of its few successes came here in Sasolburg in 1980.

Limpet mines were placed on two storage tanks. The explosions and fires that followed were spectacular, the smoke visible in Johannesburg 50 miles to the north, shaking white South Africa's sense of security.

"It is significant that I was welcomed here by the manager of Sasol in view of the past relationship between the commander of MK and its activities against Sasol," said Mr. Mandela, who founded and commanded the MK.

"It is an indication of changed times that former enemies are now working together to build a new South Africa," he said.

Interviewed later, Mr. Marshall said his appearance had nothing to do with politics.

'Meeting of businessmen'

"This was supposed to be a meeting of businessmen. We are concerned about the business implications of a new government," he said. "All we are saying is that we should be able to go about our business so we can all have a better life.

"The wrong policies will do more damage than all the limpet mines put together."

Only about 25 white businessmen were among the 100 or so people who came to the breakfast at the Sasol Club, a turnout that was blamed on short notice.

Most of them seemed to be in favor of the National Party of President F. W. de Klerk. That would make them moderates in Sasolburg, where many, perhaps the majority, of whites back the right-wing Conservative Party.

They heard the verbal weapons that are replacing the limpet mines in Mr. Mandela's arsenal as he called the National Party "a pathetic collection of weaklings, without vision, that are unable to reconcile themselves with the fate of extinction that stares them in the face."

"I do wish he would tone down what he says about the National Party a bit," said Bokkie Grobler, 45, who runs the family clothing store in Sasolburg. "But I suppose that's what we're in for for the next two months."

Mr. Mandela's appearance was part of a three-day campaign swing through the Orange Free State, a province that the Conservative Party has said might become their Volkstat, their white Afrikaner homeland. Signs proclaiming the Volkstat dot the rich agricultural landscape.

### Campaign rhetoric

Mr. de Klerk had unleashed a verbal barrage against the ANC at the National Party's congress earlier in the week. Mr. Mandela was responding in kind. Both are seeking votes in the late April elections, South Africa's first nonracial vote, that is almost certain to make Mr. Mandela the country's first president from its overwhelming black majority.

Though the Sasol bombing was a distant memory, it was still violence that concerned Mr. Grobler, as he sees the political turmoil that grips the country as the main danger to business, the one factor that could cause him to leave his native land.

He listened to Mr. Mandela condemn the National Party government for not denouncing right-wing violence, but said that the ANC has not done enough to denounce violence from the other wing.

"It's not white people who are killing each other," Mr. Grobler said.

But with political power shifting to the black majority, it is some whites who are apparently adopting the tactics once used by MK. After addressing a meeting of about 5,000 people at the soccer stadium in Sasolburg's black township, Mr. Mandela traveled to Bothaville.

Two weeks ago, a bomb was planted in front of the ANC headquarters in this placid farming community. The 10 p.m. explosion injured no one but blew out the glass storefront of the ANC offices and about five others that faced onto the courtyard just off the town's main street.

It was one of a series of 14 explosions in this area over the past several weeks. The latest, on Friday night just hours after Mr. Mandela's visit, destroyed a power line pylon and derailed a train.

Despite the violence, a white woman who worked in a nearby office and asked to be identified only as Marlene, said she was optimistic about her country's future.

"I think we are now at a point where the sun is shining on everyone," she said. "Everybody just has to be willing to give and take. If one side just wants to take and the other side give, that's not going to work."

Face it, the history of South Africa is full of fighting, so this is no different. But we're getting used to the changes. I think it's mainly the older people who have trouble.

"I just tell my children to slug it on through, that they're on the edge of history."

The damage at Mr. Mandela's third and final stop of his day's campaigning was not caused by violence, but enthusiasm. In the township of Maokeng near the city of Kroonstad, hundreds of people waiting for him climbed to the roof atop the stands at the soccer stadium where they began to toyi-toyi, the rhythmic, hopping dance of the liberation movement. One end of the roof collapsed, injuring 30, none seriously.

But it put no damper on the festive mood of the 5,000 or so people who jammed the small stadium, crowding up against the fence around the field like teen-agers waiting for rock stars.

When Mr. Mandela, 75, arrived and drove around the field in an open-backed BMW, a smile creasing his face, they cheered and screamed with unrestrained enthusiasm.

Mr. Mandela is a fairly common sight in the large townships around Johannesburg, but it was the first time most of these people had seen him in person. In his speeches he mentioned that he last visited these towns in the 1950s when he was just beginning his career as an activist lawyer before beginning his 29 years in jail in 1962.

In Maokeng, he took questions from the audience, including one about the spate of right-wing violence. "We are not retaliating," he said. "We want peace. But our people are losing patience."

Behind the stage, 42-year-old Peter Nthoesane, who said he has three children at home and hasn't had a job for three years, could hardly contain his enthusiasm.

"I am very, very, very happy to see Mandela," he said. "Black and white, we all have to go together now on the same line."