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Mandela a cat among pigeons

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SOUTH AFRICA

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JOHANNESBURG, Friday: The shockwaves set off by last week's historic meeting between President P.W. Botha and Mr Nelson Mandela, the black nationalist leader, continued to reverberate around South Africa yesterday.

Black and white politicians reassessed their positions in the light of Mr Mandela's stated commitment "to the promotion of peace", while leading anti-apartheid campaigners appeared to revise their dismissive assessment of the meeting's significance.

President Botha remained conspicuously silent, but Mr Kobie Coetsee, the Minister of Justice who set up the meeting, described it as an "absolute breakthrough".

There was confusion on the Left. The Rev Frank Chikane, general secretary of the South African Council of Churches, yesterday rowed back on the council's suggestion that Mr Mandela might have been manipulated by Pretoria. He made a fresh statement which "welcomed Mr Mandela's commitment to contribute in any way possible to the creation of a climate which will promote peace".

Mrs Winnie Mandela, the ANC leader's wife, also appeared to have second thoughts. The South African Press Association quoted

Mrs Mandela as saying on Wednesday: "We do not condemn the meeting at all. For us to get to the negotiation table, we have to start somewhere."

A positive response came from Dr Frederik Van Zyl Slabbert, former leader of the Progressive Federal Party and frequent visitor to exiled ANC leaders. "The symbolic significance of the meeting, and the consequences which will flow from it, have generated a momentum that will outstrip any petty motivations on the part of the Government."

Anglican Archbishop Desmond Tutu said Mr Mandela's statement was "remarkably statesmanlike" and should dispel the belief among many South African whites that Mr Mandela was a terrorist.

The far-right Conservative Party denounced the meeting, warning that it could open the way to majority rule.

● Mr Oliver Tambo, the ANC leader, dined in Paris yesterday with leaders of the top industrial democracies.

In a diplomatic boost for the ANC, Mr Tambo sat at the same State banquet with the British Prime Minister, Mrs Thatcher, US President Bush and more than 30 other world leaders to celebrate the bicentenary of the French Revolution.

Financial Times, Reuter

For Full Cover
Mandela/Botha Meeting
See Mandela File