

Address by Comrade Walter Sisulu to the Conference for a Democratic Future, Johannesburg, 9 December, 1989.

Comrade Chair, my dear comrades, and my dear friends, I am highly honoured by the invitation to be one of the speakers at your conference. I stand here before you, deeply conscious of the historic importance of this gathering: not since the Congress of the People in 1955 has so broad an assembly come together to chart the future of our beloved country. I salute each organisation represented here. Your presence is testimony to your steadfast commitment to democracy and your continuing struggles to win freedom for all our people.

Your diversity is our strength. In collective action, we explode the myth that an innate separateness prevents us from acting together. Our gathering here exposes as hollow De Klerk's insistence that group rights remain the cornerstone of a new South Africa.

To our valued foreign guests, we express our appreciation for their support over so many years. Your presence here today is clear evidence of the legitimisation crisis of successive South African governments. You symbolise international recognition of the justness of our struggle for liberation. We welcome you.

The gigantic task of this conference is to confirm the crucial importance of unity, and to plan a programme of mass action that builds on this unity - a programme that will challenge the apartheid state.

Friends, the history of our struggle teaches lessons of the urgency of unity as the steady platform from which we combat the exploitation of our people. Eighty years ago, the South African Native Convention met to oppose the proposed constitution for the Union of South Africa. It called for an end to racial discrimination. A delegation, which included people like Walter Rubasana, Abdul Abdurahman, Mahatma Gandhi, and the white liberal, W.P. Schreiner, assembled in London. But the imperial powers paid no attention to them. As

Abdurahman put it: "No longer can we look to our flabby friends in Great Britain." It was clear, as long ago as 1909, that political rights would only be achieved through our own efforts and in a process of struggle. The first lesson of history was that our liberty would not come as a result of a change of heart by South Africa's rulers.

In 1911, Pixley Seme proposed the formation of the South African Native Congress. He realised that unity is fundamental to our liberation. He declared: "We are one people. Let us forget the differences between Xhosa-Fingo, Zulus and Tongas, Basutos and other Natives". The following year, close on a hundred delegates, from all parts of South Africa, assembled for the inaugural conference of the A.N.C.

Slowly, but surely, the call for unity was being answered by growing numbers of people.

The first united front to be called was the Non-European Convention of 1927. It was attended by representatives from the ANC, the ICU, the APO, the Indian Congress, the Native Voters' Association, and the Bantu Union. It even had delegates from religious and welfare societies across South Africa. But it was the All-African Convention of 1935 which brought together Africans on a scale as never before.

In 1950, a new era dawned in which mass action by the people was placed at the centre of our struggle. In the face of the Suppression of Communism and the Group Areas Acts, the ANC, the Youth League, the Communist Party, the Indian Congress, and the APO, came together. This unity gained forceful expression in action through the Defiance Campaign, and it resulted in the Congress of the People at Kliptown in 1955. That Congress, like this Conference, was attended by thousands of people of all races.

Invitations to the Congress of the People were even extended to the Nationalist and United parties. But they chose to exclude themselves from the pursuit of liberty and equality. By so doing, they took the road into the moral wilderness of racial hatred and death squads.

In 1960, the leaders of nearly all the national organisations attended a summit conference which resulted in the All-in African Conference of March the following year. That was the last such gathering in our history, before this one today. In May 1961, the regime struck out viciously at the marshalled forces for democracy, declaring a state of emergency and arresting thousands of us. We learnt another lesson. In the face of our unity and resoluteness, the regime falters. It grows desperate and turns to violence and repression. In response to the rejection of our political initiatives, the people of this country resorted to armed struggle. We hear the government demanding the cessation of these military activities. For the government to make this call in the face of the continued use of states of emergency, the implementation of a set of laws that make our country a police state, and the retention of a ban on political organisations, shows the government's inability to recognise that resistance is the necessary corollary to repression.

The long struggle for unity has also taught us that the technique of divide and rule is the modus operandi of the apartheid state. Our response is to remain steadfast in the search for broader unity. Indeed, we cannot be satisfied with even the broadness of this conference. Our aim is a greater one. It is to unite the whole of our society.

We face another formidable task here today. That is to plan the way forward for a democratic future. The history of our struggle demonstrates that unity, without action, is fragile and temporary. Today we will decide on a programme of action. In the course of the actions decided on, we will build a real and permanent comradeship with one another. We will become a broad people's movement. Our actions will help us to mobilise people and win allies even outside of this conference.

This assembly of delegates, from all corners of our beloved country, is meeting at a time when developments, both nationally and internationally, require fresh analysis. It is a time of new opportunities and new challenges.

The South African regime has its back to the wall. It is confronted by our vital and renewed resistance. It faces a serious economic crisis, and massive international pressure. As a result, the regime has been forced into a state of

transition. It cannot be certain that it can control the events which will result from these changes. This situation provides us with the tremendous opportunity which we have today. It distinguishes this moment from the other occasions in history when we have sought unity in action.

The challenge that faces us is how best to take advantage of this opportunity to realise our goals of a united, just and democratic country. To meet this challenge we need a clear analysis of the present strategies of the ruling class. We need to develop a coherent programme of mass action that will strengthen and unify our people. In doing this we must remain tenacious to our principles, but be flexible in our tactics.

We seek a new way forward. We will dip into the reservoirs of our collective experience and history in order to find that way. We will draw on our rich culture of resistance. The long years of our resistance have sunk the roots of freedom, and the principles of our struggle, deep into society. They cannot be unearthed easily. These roots will hold us steady, and nurture us. They will allow us to use the opportunities and challenges presented by the current situation to make a qualitative leap forward in our struggle.

How do we understand the current situation? The disastrous policies of the Nationalist government have come to a head in an economic crisis that places unprecedented pressure on the apartheid state.

The government no longer has the means to buy the support of selected constituencies. It is struggling to finance the edifice of apartheid services. The resistance of the people has contributed towards escalating the cost of apartheid.

Sanctions, boycotts and disinvestment have effectively isolated the regime. The government desperately needs its foreign creditors to continue to extend the period of debt repayment. It knows that this depends on it being seen to put its shambled house in order.

The crisis of confidence in the investment climate has fractured the once formidable ruling bloc. Sections within that ruling bloc are increasingly aware that the house can only be rebuilt with the participation of all our people, on the principles of freedom, equality and a living wage. Those groups know that under such conditions we are ready to offer them our hand.

The country is experiencing a further crisis: a crisis of morality. The widespread violence in Natal is a malignant tumour in an ailing society. The proven complicity of the police with vigilantes and warlords is viewed with horror. Every day now, new information about government corruption, and terrifying revelations about death squads, shock the population. The country is sickened by this gruesome litany of evil and violence. Ordinary people are saying "Enough!". Members of the security forces, shamed by their betrayal of the norms of human decency, are breaking away from the very order that they are trained to uphold.

Our resistance presents the regime with another crisis. It has done its utmost to break us: whipping our people; declaring the states of emergency; assassinating and detaining our leaders; abducting, poisoning and murdering our activists. It has marshalled all its forces, in most horrible array. And it has failed. We assemble here today in greater numbers than ever before.

In the face of its many crises, the regime has had no choice but to start tinkering with apartheid. Most of De Klerk's moves have been designed to capture media attention and to improve South Africa's image abroad. They are moves that the allies of the South African regime have long urged it to take, accurately understanding that they do not entail any lessening of government power.

But the steps which the regime has taken in that direction are uncertain and tentative. It is not united in choosing this path. Already, De Klerk has restructured the central bodies of power, curbing the security establishment. The result is discontent and cleavage within the apartheid state.

The strategic objectives underlying these changes are clear: reform to the minimum extent that the South African people might be persuaded to accept;

and the protection, as far as possible, of the privileges of the white minority. We are aware that De Klerk has no choice but to go further than his predecessors on these points. But we know that, of his own accord, he has limits beyond which he will not go. It is our historic purpose to take him there; or to go without him.

The ultimate aim of the regime is a so-called "Great Indaba" - a negotiating forum convened on the basis of representation from the tri-cameral parliament, the bantustans, and other "groups", such as the group described as "urban blacks". All of De Klerk's "groups" will have the power of veto. In other words, the white minority "group" will retain the power to prevent fundamental changes to the system. These ideas are incompatible with the principles of our struggle, and are rejected by the people of South Africa. We reiterate our continued commitment to one person, one vote in a united South Africa, as the non-negotiable principle upon which the democratic future will be built.

Economic "reforms" are the other component of De Klerk's "package". The regime seeks urgently to place the economy on a better footing. It wants to ensure the inflow of capital and loans, stabilise the foreign exchange reserves, and to generate more rapid growth. It is wooing big business with its privatisation programme and its concerted drive against the working class. But the benefits of these policies will be confined to a limited section of the population. These measures will provoke a reaction by the working class that is likely to undermine the very objectives which they are meant to achieve. This approach is thus inherently contradictory and ultimately self-defeating. Notwithstanding, it is in these ways that the regime seeks to normalise the internal political situation, and to gain the space and time to pursue its political programme without undue external pressures.

We need to be alert to De Klerk's efforts to present his so-called reforms as "Great Beginnings". This is an attempt to de-escalate the struggle, and to end international isolation. There can be no "Great Beginnings" while his killing machines continue to operate; while our patriots remain on Death Row and in prison; while our activists and leaders are in detention, and our political organisations are banned. Our grievance is our exclusion from political power; our objective is a transfer of power. Segregated beaches have symbolised our

exclusion; but their desegregation is not a transfer of power. That is the fraud that De Klerk seeks to perpetrate.

Through our resistance, in particular through the campaign of Mass Defiance, the people's movement has exposed these strategies for what they are. It has also publicly asserted itself as an energetic and powerful force embodying the stifled aspirations of millions of people. The task of this conference is to decide how best to channel that power and energy as we step forward into 1990.

In the recent mass marches to the city centres, activists and city councillors, workers and concerned business people, have marched alongside one another. This indicates the strength of the moral appeal of the people's movement.

The marches have brought mass struggles out of the ghettos. Ordinary people, both black and white, have shown a powerful desire to stand up and to act. They want to bury the decomposing apartheid corpse, and to replace it with the hope of a new born South Africa.

Through their involvement in the programme of unity in action, in its many different forms, they will have the opportunity to do this. The involvement of a vast range of people in our campaigns will ensure that the people themselves chart and control the direction of the future, including any process of negotiation. This will make it impossible for the Nationalist government, or imperialist elements to hijack such negotiations. The initiative will be concentrated in the hands of the broad liberation movement.

Our aim is to involve the widest range of people possible in the programme of action. Their ranks will include some who have different visions for the future. That is to be expected, even welcomed. We do not advocate that any one group has a monopoly over all the answers. The democratic forces in this country recognise the need for the co-existence of diverse views. The only exception that we make is that we will not accept racism in any form. We argue that diversity is a wonderful resource from which new solutions to our problems will be found.

Our unity today is more important than our differences. To bicker now, or to

relax in our efforts to obtain unity, will be to throw away the hard-won gains of resistance of past decades.

Our gathering today sends a message to the rulers of this country:

Mr. De Klerk, your back is to the wall. When you raise your eyes now, you can look only in one direction. In so doing you meet the eyes of the people. There is much in our steady gaze that you may wish to ignore. There is also much that you must envy. You see our unflinching commitment to the cause of liberty, justice and equality. This is a noble cause, sanctioned by the world community. Like us, you must long for these things. Yet, you have excluded yourself from them.

In fear perhaps, you shorten your gaze to the stoney ground that lies between you and us. Look up. Do not be afraid. Others from your community have stepped boldly forward, and found a home with the democratic movement. We have welcomed them. Like you, they love dearly their country, and their people. Like you, they treasure their culture. Unlike you, however, they have added a love of democracy and of liberty to the things that they hold most dear. They have added a love of all their fellow South Africans.

Come stand on the floor of a conference like this. Like the rest of our delegates, bring a mandate from those who want you to represent them. Submit to the processes of democracy. It is true that you will be only one among many delegates. But you will not be lonely. Come and feel the power of unity and action with the people of South Africa, instead of against them.

To those who have long stood beside you, the homeland leaders in particular, we extend the same invitation.

Mr de Klerk your reforms can only draw you onto the stoney ground between us. It is a ground which has been laid by apartheid. The Land Act, the Group Areas Act, the Population Registration Act - they are stones which have been laid in the path of a united and democratic country. Clear the stoney ground between us and these rocks will not be hurled back at you.

Mr. De Klerk, you see also in our eyes a challenge: we challenge you to recognise the current situation for what it is. Act now so that we may minimise the damage to our people and our land. Abandon the "Great Indaba" and the "Black Election". Submit to a democratically elected Constituent Assembly.

On the occasion of this historic conference, we call on the people of South Africa, on all of you present today, and the many others who are not here, but who are united in their opposition to apartheid, to seize the present opportunity to move forward in action, together. Let us commit ourselves to taking mass protest to its highest level during 1990.

We call on workers in the mines, the factories, the farms, in the shops and back-yards, to lead the entire people in a campaign for a living wage, and workers' rights.

We call on our people in the countryside to demand access to the land that lies empty and unused. The land should belong to those who work it.

We call on our white compatriots to embark on mass action under the slogan "No to Apartheid".

Today, we make a special call to members of the army and the police force to recognise that breaking from the order that forces them to commit atrocities is a moral imperative. Join the struggles of the people.

We call on each and every one of our compatriots to join hands in the struggle against press censorship, death squads, political imprisonment, and all other forms of repression.

At this conference, let us once again call on the people of Natal to extend the hand of peace and to sheath the weapons of war. Let the rival groups in the townships and villages launch mass peace campaigns so that the meddling of the regime may be exposed.

Let us resolve to build a united front of all anti-apartheid forces, for the establishment of true democracy and lasting peace. Let us not forget that important lesson of modern history: it was only a united front of workers and professionals, communists and capitalists, people of all religions, that made possible the defeat of fascism in Europe in the 1940s.

All our people, black and white, together with the world community, await the momentous decisions of this assembly. Be mindful that Mr. De Klerk and his government tremble as they too wait. Let us disappoint no one.

Forward to the united front for freedom and democracy!

Amandla!