

“Ceremony of Remembrance” for President Nelson Mandela

A Tribute by the President of the United Nations General Assembly

President Zuma,
Former First Lady Graciela Machel,
Heads of State and Government,
Former Heads of State and Government,
Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon,
Head of the African Union Commission, Madam Zuma,
Distinguished Guests,
Ladies, Gentlemen and Young People of South Africa and the
around the world,

On behalf of the United Nations General Assembly, which I have the distinct honour to represent, allow me to express our deepest condolences to members of the Mandela family, to the people and Government of South Africa, and to all whomourn the loss of the man, Nelson “Madiba” Mandela.

The triumph of evil has failed because in the darkest moments of human history, when the actions and tyranny of individuals and groups threaten to destroy the very fabric of society, to devalue the dignity of the individual, to rob generations of their future and deprive them of their sense of self-worth, and when it seems like the very essence of our humanity will be tainted- somehow and against tremendous odds- an individual emerges who sheds a new

light on a path that has not been taken before, who provides each of us a glimpse into our better selves, who encourages us to choose hope over despair, and forgiveness over revenge, and whose ideas and actions transcend borders and shines through the ages with a universal and lasting impact.

Nelson Mandela was such an individual. And we are gathered here today at this “ceremony of remembrance” to honour his memory, recount his achievements and, I hope, ensure that his good deeds are never forgotten, and that his legacy lives on.

The life and legacy of great individuals so fundamentally alter the course of history that their names are ever remembered and ever repeated and so will the name of Nelson Mandela. That is why so many of us, from all corners of the globe, are here in this very stadium, in this most seminal of towns, Soweto, – to mourn Mandela’s passing but most of all, to celebrate his life.

Madiba demonstrated that all of us are equal when given the opportunity, and that superiority of character has no racial boundaries. One of his most powerful and enduring lessons was found in his ability to rise above the odds, to become a beacon of hope at the bleakest human hour, and in the darkest places.

I speak on behalf of countless others all over the world, who will all testify to the fact that in Madiba's presence and through his life's work- we found and continue to find our better and more purpose driven selves. And indeed, it is in the finding of our better and more purpose driven selves that the example of Madiba's life can be emulated, particularly in these difficult times of ours.

We must draw inspiration from Madiba's full and firm belief in the words of the United Nations Charter that all human beings are entitled to fundamental rights and freedom, without distinction of race, gender, ethnicity or religion.

It is therefore fortuitous that on this very day, as we gather to honour Mandela's memory, we also mark the 65th anniversary of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights. This inspirational and aspirational document became a road map for the then fledging United Nations, affirming that basic rights and fundamental freedoms are inherent to all human beings- inalienable and equally applicable to everyone, at all times. The Declaration transformed into reality the bold and audacious premise that all people – regardless of circumstance – are born free and equal in dignity and rights.

I can therefore think of no more fitting time and place to recall that this country's first black President, Nelson Mandela, fought for human rights and justice, saying in 2005 [and I quote]:

“As long as poverty, injustice and gross inequality persist in our world, none of us can truly rest.”

Let us share Mandela's understanding that there can be no true development unless all people have access to equal human rights, democracy, dignity, and freedom. Indeed, none of us should rest, when there are so many across the globe who still begin and end their days in the dark, hungry and terrified to face the tragedies of another tomorrow. None of us can rest, when there is conflict and bloodshed in many parts of the world and when there are tensions and violence born of traditional and long held divisions, or stemming from ethnic and/or religious differences. None of us should rest till we ensure that with human decency, bravery and ingenuity, we work together toward a better tomorrow for all.

Madiba's determination that his people must be free, and his unswerving belief that injustice anywhere is injustice everywhere, showed all of us from nations, big and small, landlocked and

island, rich and poor, with powerful armies and some with no army at all, that the pursuit of justice and democracy for our fellow human beings, the very principles on which the UN was founded, are valid and enduring precepts for which heroes are “prepared to live, work and if necessary, to die.”

He has left us many rich lessons but I believe that one of the most fundamental ways in which we, as representatives of an Assembly of Nations, can best celebrate and continue Madiba’s legacy is to work towards a world free of poverty, shame, discrimination and intolerance. It was he who reminded us that "poverty is not natural. It is man-made and it can be overcome and eradicated by the actions of human beings."

Let us honour the powerful human truth that Madiba represented, that wherever peoples are oppressed and crippled by discrimination, there are, and should be people who stand up to the oppressors, and speak up against discrimination. And in so doing, let us never forget that when faced with the most severe hardships and deprivations for many years, Madiba endured with a generosity of spirit, a keenness of intellect, and a capacity for forgiveness and humour that few others have been able to summon.

In this solemn moment, let us all recommit ourselves to the cause of our fellowman, in the hope that by so doing, like Mandela, the work of the UN and its member nations can also bring dignity and hope to those who are forced to live under the shackles of poverty and discrimination.

On behalf of the diverse gathering of the world's nations, today, our United Nations General Assembly, whom, it may be recalled, acted with forthrightness on the question of the ending apartheid when it mattered most, I join the people of South Africa in mourning the passing of your greatest son and in celebrating the life and legacy of a leader who inspired his people, transformed a nation, energized a continent, gave hope to untold millions and symbolized a better tomorrow for people all over the world.

Thank you.