

27 April 2004

**Statement of H.E. Mr. Julian Robert Hunte,  
President of the 58th Session of the General Assembly,  
at the Commemorative Meeting for Ten Years of Freedom in South  
Africa: The Role of the United Nations**

Mr Secretary-General, Senior United Nations Officials, Excellencies, Distinguished Delegates, Ladies and Gentlemen:

I recall, as vividly as if it were today, that momentous occasion on 27 April 1994, when a new South Africa emerged triumphantly from the dark past of apartheid into the light of democracy and freedom. I feel greatly honoured today to chair this special celebration, and to welcome you all, as we join the Government and people of South Africa and well-wishers the world over in commemorating Ten Years of democracy and freedom in South Africa.

South Africa's significant accomplishment is also an accomplishment for the United Nations. From the moment the organisation received the danger signal that a founding member had taken a retrograde step to institutionalise racism and racial discrimination in defiance of the Charter, ending the abhorrent system of apartheid became a matter of priority for the organisation.

For over four decades, the United Nations gave international leadership and direction to the struggle against apartheid. Notwithstanding the different perspectives some took on this issue, the organisation shared the vision of the majority of South Africans for a country free from racism, racial discrimination, violence, despair and violation of human rights and fundamental freedoms. It therefore gave moral standing to voices worldwide that demanded racial equality, economic progress and social justice for all South Africans.

Acting in accordance with the Charter and international law, the United Nations used every means available to bring about peaceful change in South Africa. Apartheid was declared to be a crime and declarations and treaties were adopted by the General Assembly to eliminate it, as well as to prevent sporting contacts with South Africa. Specific mechanisms were created, including the Special Committee Against Apartheid, of which Ambassador Gambari was Chairman, to monitor developments in South Africa.

Economic, oil, and arms embargoes were imposed on South Africa; Special Representatives were appointed to monitor the situation there; international days and international years were declared to raise public awareness of the terrible price apartheid was extracting, whether at Sharpeville or Soweto or in neighbouring sovereign states. The United Nations recognised the legitimacy of the majority of South Africans to engage in a struggle for their individual and political freedom, while consistently urging the South African government to adhere to its obligations under the Charter and international law.

Other international organisations, non-governmental organisations and individuals joined the United Nations in the anti-apartheid efforts. Notwithstanding South Africa's withdrawal from the Commonwealth, that organisation stayed the course. Acting in concert with the United Nations, it brought pressure to bear on the Government of South Africa to end apartheid and played its part in supporting the dismantling of the system.

As representative of a Caribbean Community (CARICOM) country, St Lucia, I would be remiss if I did not recognise the systematic and proactive efforts of our leaders, governments and people towards ending apartheid, in the United Nations and as well, in the Commonwealth. The late Michael Manley, former Prime Minister of Jamaica, was a dynamic and committed advocate for the rights of the majority of South Africans, and his strong support for the initiative to end sporting contacts with apartheid South Africa is well known. The late Dame Nita Barrow, former Governor General of Barbados, served on the Commonwealth's Eminent Person's Group. More recently, Angela King gave exemplary service to the United Nations as head of its Observer Mission in South Africa (UNOMSA).

The tribute for shaking off the mantle of apartheid, however belong to the people of South Africa. I have come to regard South Africa as a country in which one can expect the unexpected. For example, after 27 years, Nelson Mandela, freed from prison became leader of a free and democratic South Africa. The people of South Africa have demonstrated an exceptional ability to forgive the architects and perpetrators of the apartheid, which has earned them respect and admiration worldwide.

Nation building is never an easy task, even in the best of circumstances. To do so while addressing half a century of inequity is challenging. Needs are pressing, promoting sustainable development is an enormous task, and expectations may be high. Notwithstanding decades of racism, racial discrimination and oppression, South Africans have been uniquely successful in their national reconciliation and nation building efforts. They can be justifiably proud of their accomplishments, which serve as an inspiration for all.

Importantly, South Africa has taken its rightful place in the community of nations, providing proven leadership in organisations including the United Nations, the Commonwealth and the African Union. In the United Nations, in particular, it is to be commended for its support and leadership in key United Nations activities, including meetings such as the World Summit for Sustainable Development.

The Government and people of South Africa also have a proven track record in keeping their diverse country on the democratic path. On 14 April, South Africans went to the polls for the third time. For the third time, they exercised their right to choose those who would govern them, without disruption, in free and fair elections. I wish to take this opportunity to congratulate President Mbeki as he again takes up the high office of President.

There are many lessons we can learn from South Africa's struggles and triumphs. I wish to mention just two. The first is the United Nations has the capacity to deal effectively with racism and racial discrimination, including extreme forms such as apartheid, and can do so, if the political will exists. The second lesson is that multilateralism works. Our celebration, therefore, includes recognition of multilateral efforts that helped to bring democracy and freedom to South Africa. But above, it is a celebration of a democratic, free and progressive South Africa.

I thank you.