

Address by President JG Zuma at the Ahmed Kathrada eightieth birthday celebration dinner; Trade Route Mall Convention Centre, Lenasia

15 August 2009

Programme Director and Chair of the Kathrada Foundation, Mr Cyril Ramaphosa,
Isithwalandwe Ahmed Kathrada,
Minister of Finance, Pravin Gordhan,
Minister of Public Enterprises, Barbara Hogan,
Deputy Minister of Science and Technology, Derek Hanekom,
Indian High Commissioner, Mr R K Bhatia,
MECs and mayors,
Veterans of our liberation struggle,
Community and business leaders,
Friends of Kathrada,
Distinguished guests,
Ladies and gentlemen,
Good evening.

It is so wonderful to come together for a celebration and a glorious occasion as this one. We are here to honour a man who is an inspiration to all South Africans. A man whose life is a chronicle of the struggle against apartheid.

A man who belongs to the generation of Sisulu and Mandela's, the likes of which this country will not witness again in a very long time. A man who remains a lion of the liberation movement.

We therefore come together to reflect on his life, to the contribution he has made to the struggle and talk about the values that he would want us to take forward. This celebration comes at an auspicious time as we move closer to the start of the holy month of Ramadan. The month of fasting reminds us of the plight of the poor and hungry in our society.

It is a time for reflection on our role in society and the very nature of that society. It is these religious underpinnings that have shaped the character of the man we know as Ahmed Mohamed Kathrada. His dedication to the cause for freedom is characterised by the high moral, social, and spiritual values which Islam sets for all its followers and which come to the fore during the month of Ramadan.

These values have guided Comrade Kathy and placed him on the path that has helped shape the history of this country. Where does one start with Kathy's contribution to the liberation struggle? A communist at the age of 12; jailed at 17 during the Passive Resistance Campaign for defying the Ghetto Act, which compelled Indians to live, trade and own land in specific areas.

We are talking about a leader in the Defiance Campaign who helped organise the Congress of the People which drew up the Freedom Charter. He was a treason trialist; a member of Umkhonto we Sizwe and a dedicated MK cadre who participated in the early days of the armed struggle. Convicted in the Rivonia Trial, he served 26 years in prison, mostly on Robben Island and then Pollsmoor Prison.

This is a cadre who became a Member of Parliament in the democratic government of 1994; and Parliamentary Counsellor to President Mandela. Having suffered many banning orders and house arrests, until his imprisonment, he was intimately involved in every major event that shaped the early years of non-racial opposition to apartheid.

His contribution to a free South Africa, like that of many of his contemporaries, was immense. Today we celebrate the 80th birthday of our Comrade. Just like Tata Madiba's 91st birthday, this is no ordinary birthday. We're rejoicing the life of an inspiring revolutionary spanning over 65 years. Comrade Kathy is a living example of the best traditions and values of the ANC. His life offers so many characteristics that embody the best examples of revolutionary existence and practice.

His life stands out as a testament of who we should be and how we should conduct ourselves in the cause of a revolutionary struggle and social transformation. On a personal level, he has displayed a life of simplicity, complete humility and honesty. He has maintained a modest lifestyle despite his considerable achievements. His love for children, which stems from the years of deprivation experienced in prison, remains a hallmark of his character and a guiding force in his work, even today.

At a political level, Comrade Kathrada's life is one of total commitment to the ANC and its revolutionary struggle. It's a concept he learnt in his youth under the tutorship of revolutionary giants such as Dr Yusuf Dadoo, Moses Kotane and Walter Sisulu. All his life he has subscribed to the revolutionary principles of personal discipline, self sacrifice lifelong commitment to struggle, collective leadership, non-factional organisational practice, democratic centralism and organisational unity.

His revolutionary conception of our struggle saw his participation in particularistic struggles through the Transvaal Indian Congress; the national democratic struggle through the ANC; the class struggle through the SACP; and the armed struggle through MK. Kathrada remains deeply supportive of gender struggles for women's liberation and empowerment. He is an internationalist, supporting liberation and anti-colonial movements and struggles worldwide.

Cde Kathrada's profound contribution to our liberation movements is his abiding commitment to non-racialism. Together with leaders like Dadoo and Dr Monty Naicker, they initially forged a principled non-racial relationship with the African political leadership in the late 1940s and 1950s. This was later translated into a firm organisational alliance between the Indian congresses and the ANC.

His loyalty to the principle of non-racialism was put to test in famous Treason Trial. When confronted with the prospect of a reduced sentence during the trial, Kathrada opted to be sentenced with Mandela and others, knowing full well that this could be a life sentence or a death sentence. The ANC's commitment to non-racialism emanates from such acts of personal heroism and courage.

Sentenced to life imprisonment on Robben Island, at Mandela's side he learnt the principle of forgiveness and reconciliation, thereby setting the foundation stones for national unity and social cohesion in our democracy. Forgiving one's former tormentors and oppressors remains the characteristic of our peaceful transition to a democratic order, which has enabled blacks to embrace whites as their compatriots in a post-apartheid society.

The mainspring for reconciliation is ultimately rooted in the principle of non-racialism. Comrade Kathy turned his prison cell into a university. Studying by correspondence, he obtained two BA degrees and two honours degrees (in history and African politics). The prison authorities refused to allow him to pursue postgraduate studies. He is known for his good sense of humour, his soft-naturalness and kindness. He's not one that acts with rancour, divisiveness, conspiracy or opaqueness. His life is an open book for all to see. We draw inspiration from him and his living example.

We are proud and privileged to be living with him and others like him such as Tata Madiba. Having spent 18 years of his life as the occupant of Cell 14, Section B, it is a wonder that this generation of men did not walk out of their 4,5 metre square cells with revenge in their hearts.

It is testimony to the enduring spirit of human forgiveness that men like Comrade Kathy chose the high road to a new and prosperous South Africa, rather than let hatred dictate their actions. This is a lesson we can all learn from.

He has also been awarded several honorary doctorates in South Africa and around the world. He has been the recipient of the following prestigious awards in recognition of his contribution to South Africa's liberation struggle:

- * Isithwalandwe, the highest award bestowed by the African National Congress (ANC)
- * the ANC's Merit Award for Long Service
- * the Presidential Order of Meritorious Service Class 1- Gold
- * the Pravasi Bharatiya Samman Award bestowed by the President of India.

Kathy's contribution both to the liberation struggle and South Africa has been immense. There are several dimensions that I would like to explore.

The first is Kathy the freedom fighter. A wide range of influences had inspired him.

Gandhi's Satyagraha that was forged in South Africa around the turn of the last century and then taken into the Indian independence struggle was an important influence. So were other independence and liberation struggles in the Third World. Kathy's membership of the South African Communist Party was predicated upon an abhorrence of class exploitation. And he was strongly supportive of the tenets of non-racialism, non-sexism and democracy of the Congress Alliance.

He has been a member of a great many organisations, including the Transvaal Indian Congress, Umkhonto weSizwe, South African Communist Party and the African National Congress.

We have observed that Kathy was imbued with an indomitable spirit. Every time the regime harassed, detained, arrested, banned, house arrested and imprisoned him, he always returned. He was brave, defiant and fearless. When the regime served banning orders on him in 1954 prohibiting him from attending gatherings and from membership of a long list of organisations, he wrote a letter to the youth of South Africa:

"For nine years I have been working as a full-time official in the National Liberatory Movement.

"For these nine years and more, you and the people whom we represent have over and over again expressed your full confidence in our policies and actions by electing me and re-electing us to the leadership of our organisations.

"Now I have been ordered to resign my positions from various organisations and not to become a member of some 39 bodies. This order comes, not from you, not from the people who elected me, and to whom I am directly responsible, but from a fanatical Minister of State, in the appointment of whom neither I nor the great majority of the people of South Africa had any say.

"I am not addressing these lines to my friends and comrades as a farewell letter...

"I wish to assure you that I will be at your disposal to serve you in any manner you wish; as in the past, so at present and in the future.

"No sacrifice will be too great in the struggle to achieve freedom in our lifetime."

Kathy's second great act of public service has been his role as a companion of our leaders. We know that Kathy closely interacted with leaders of the Indian Congress such as Yusuf Dadoo, Monty Naicker, Molvi Cachalia, Ismail Meer, JN Singh, Naransamy Naidoo, Billy Nair and others from an early age.

He first met Nelson Mandela, Walter Sisulu, Oliver Tambo, JB Marks and Moses Kotane in the 1940s.

He was charged with Madiba and Tata Sisulu on three occasions: the Defiance Campaign Trial, the Treason Trial and the Rivonia Trial. The bonds between Kathy and these leaders run deep. They were forged in struggle, but solidified during their imprisonment. During the long, hard years on Robben Island, they challenged each other on the profound political and strategic questions of the day.

They shared their sorrows and pains; as they did their moments of happiness. This companionship, friendship and comradeship were critical in sustaining their spirits.

As Kathy said of the Island, after his release:

"While we will not forget the brutality of apartheid, we will not want Robben Island to be a monument of our hardship and suffering. We would want it to be a triumph of the human spirit against the forces of evil.

"A triumph of wisdom and largeness of spirit against small minds and pettiness a triumph of courage and determination over human frailty and weakness; a triumph of the new South Africa over the old."

Kathy's third major act of service to South African society was that of public representative. From 1994 to 1999, he served as a Member of Parliament and as President Nelson Mandela's Parliamentary Counsellor - a role that he executed with great distinction. We also remember Kathy's passion for Robben Island and his sterling contribution as Chairperson of the Robben Island Museum Council.

We are deeply indebted to him as South Africa as a whole and honour him on the occasion of his 80th birthday. Kathy is not only a public figure.

He is also a private citizen with a host of interests and aspects that I would like cover. Kathy is a wonderful storyteller. Many of us have been privy to his interesting and insightful dinner recollections and reminiscences. These are always delivered with wit and great sense of humour.

Kathy has always stated that the pre-eminent historian of the African National Congress was the late Walter Sisulu. During the long stay behind bars, Kathy imbibed many of these narratives, and through ongoing discussion, robust debate and disciplined study; Kathy is now a renowned historian and scholar.

Publication of several books over the years has deepened our understanding of our history and has provided important new insights.

He published Letters from Robben Island in 1999, Memoirs in 2004 and A Simple Freedom in 2008. Kathy's enjoys a wide range of interpersonal relationships.

He has a very wide range of friendships that span nationality, race, class, gender and age. A great many of these date back to the 1940s and 1950s.

Kathy has always had a place in his heart for his extended family of parents, siblings, nephews and nieces and now grand nephews and nieces.

Kathy also has several godchildren, some of whom were born during his days on the Island. A special tribute must be made to Barbara Hogan, who has been Kathy's life partner for almost 20 years. The initial spark of attraction must have been the common experience of being behind bars for a long time. But they have sustained and deepened their relationship through a shared idea of humanity and justice, and a mutual sense of good humour.

In this final part of my address, I want to talk about the values that Kathy stands for and their relevance to our country today. The first value that I want to talk about is justice. This is not a narrow concept only related to the judicial system. It is wider idea that encompasses notions of democracy, development, environmental sustainability and constitutional rights. The best birthday present we can give Kathy is to redouble our efforts to build a just society.

As I said at my inauguration on 9 May 2009:

"We make a commitment here and now, before the eyes of the world, that:

For as long as there are South Africans who die from preventable disease;

For as long as there are workers who struggle to feed their families;

For as long as there are communities without clean water, decent shelter or proper sanitation;

For as long as there are rural dwellers unable to make a decent living from the land on which they live;

For as long as there are women who are subjected to discrimination, exploitation or abuse;

For as long as there are children who do not have the means nor the opportunity to receive a decent education;

For as long as there are people who are unable to find work, we shall not rest, and we dare not falter."

Kathy holds the value of non-racialism very close to his heart.

Our movement has since its inception been a non-racial, non-sexist, democratic organisation. It has stood against any forms of discrimination and racism.

When the ANC was founded in Mangaung in 1912, it was a response to a call that had been made by Pixley ka Isaka Seme in 1911 when he denounced the 'demon of racism' and appealed to all Africans to unite and form an organisation that would take care of interests of African people.

In Seme's words, "the demon of racialism, the aberration of the Xhosa-Fingo feud, the animosity that exists between the Zulus and the Tongas, between the Basutos and every other native must be buried and forgotten."

"These divisions, these jealousies, are the cause of all our woes and of all our backwardness and ignorance today."

For the past 97 years of the ANC's existence we have actively promoted this non-racial character of our movement. Many of our leaders have taught us about the importance of this principle; they have spoken and lived non-racialism.

We know what our responsibility is on this matter. We remember the clear message given to us by our President OR Tambo when he said:

"It is our responsibility to break down barriers of division and create a country where there will be neither whites nor blacks, just South Africans, free and united in diversity. We have no room for anyone who promotes divisions and racism.

"When we fought against racism it was because we believed in these noble ideas, which have been consistently articulated by our leaders."

These noble ideas were memorably captured by our icon, Nelson Mandela, in his statement from the dock in 1964, when he said:

"During my lifetime I have dedicated myself to the struggle of the African people.

"I have fought against white domination, and I have fought against black domination.

"I have cherished the ideal of a democratic and free society in which all persons live together in harmony and with equal opportunities.

"It is an ideal which I hope to live for and to achieve.

"But if needs be, it is an ideal for which I am prepared to die."

Similarly, the value of non-sexism is one of the key values that Kathy has fought for over the years. Just a few days ago we celebrated National Women's Day. There we emphasised the centrality of gender equality in building a just and equal society.

Lastly, I believe that the final value that Kathy would like me to emphasise is that of selfless commitment. This is idea that we all have a common interest in building a better South Africa

and a better world for ourselves and our children. In this regard, I call upon all South Africans to make their own contribution to building a better society.

This means getting involved in community-based organisations (CBOs), participation in school governing bodies, volunteering in social development organisations, working as police reservists, ensuring corporate social investment, and promoting the values of Batho Pele.

South Africans responded to the call for 67 minutes of voluntary work on the occasion of Nelson Mandela's 91st birthday with the greatest enthusiasm.

Let us continue this into the future. One of Kathy's favourite quotes is a Chinese proverb: "I grumbled because I had no shoes, until I met a man who had no feet."

It reminded him that while there was hardship and suffering in prison, there was always the knowledge that our comrades on the outside had it worse. This phrase reflects the selfless dedication that has characterised his commitment to the liberation struggle and a free and democratic South Africa.

It continues to guide his work in the service of fellow South Africans.

The Ahmed Kathrada Foundation was established in 2007 to celebrate the life and times of Ahmed Mohamed Kathrada. In his memoirs, Kathrada aptly provides the Foundation with its mission statement:

"Uppermost in our minds should be the strengthening of our non-racial, non-sexist democracy, and the priority of uplifting the lives of the poorest of the poor."

The Foundation is committed to promoting in the public domain his personal values, such as self-sacrifice, humility, integrity in public office, reconciliation and political, religious and social tolerance. The Research and Documentation Centre will focus on three pillars of Kathrada's illustrious political career, namely, non-racialism, the Indian political contribution to South Africa, and the promotion of social justice through economic development.

The Centre will provide a perfect venue for South Africans to engage with one another, especially with members of the local community surrounding the Centre, to discuss how to bring about the ideals articulated in the Freedom Charter. I urge all South Africans to contribute to the growth and development of this Foundation in the interests of transferring to our future generations the ideals of Ahmed Kathrada.

On 21 August Prisoner 468/64 of the Robben Island celebrates his 80th birthday.

Let me conclude by wishing Isithwalandwe Ahmed Kathrada a very happy 80th birthday and may he see many more.

I thank you.

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