

COMMEMORATING THE BLACK JULY OF 1983 IN SRI LANKA

Presented by Sisa Njikelana at Chatsworth on Friday, 25th July 2008

As we are just beginning to prepare South Africans to, once again, express their opinions publicly about this lovely country. They will directly express their views by electing new leadership, free of compulsion and duress. They will be indirectly expressing their views of how the current leadership has performed. Such should have been the case for the 3000 Tamils whose lives were brutally terminated due to probably one crime they committed that is they wanted to be dignified citizens enjoying rights in their country as we are steadfastly and successfully striving do in South Africa.

Brian Senewiratne, a Sinhalese reminds us that, “Some 3,000 Tamil civilians died that week and their homes and property burnt. Many more would have died had it not been for courageous Sinhalese, ordinary decent Sinhalese, who risked life, limb and property to hide Tamils and save them from certain death. Thank God for some decent Sinhalese. I have no doubt that some of them tendered an apology to the devastated and petrified Tamils, but the best apology was the shelter they provided at considerable risk to themselves.”

Without any doubt, when commemorating this tragic event we need to be mindful of what those courageous Sinhalese did to save lives.

Allow me to further present a context of what I will be sharing with you today. Much as I am a member of Parliament, I am also a deployee of the ANC and therefore subscribe to its principles and values. Undoubtedly and unavoidably then I will strongly draw a lot from the ANC with regards ideas I will be sharing tonight.

On strengthening multilateralism and co-operation South Africa has worked to promote a rules-bound international political and economic order to consolidate South-South collaboration by participation in groupings like the NAM, UNCTAD, SADC and AU. This signals the respect we have for attempts to mould the world

towards a new order which would be intolerant to massacres, human suffering caused by other humans, oppression, exploitation and brutalisation of the vulnerable. However international solidarity and its expected impact seems to elude Sri Lanka from time to time. The looming tragedy of global inertia in situations such as Sri Lankan conflict is a matter of grave concern. The same occurred in Rwanda and Burundi – the world was just watching and dilly-dallying whilst humans were butchering each other. There are times whereby my observation leads to one conclusion i.e. the conflict in Sri Lanka is not a priority to some of the key global players and therefore may just have to be “shelved” for the time being.

The vitality of regional players especially India needs utmost attention and support during such trying times. I also join those who are making a passionate appeal to all parties embroiled in the conflict to make amends and ensure they engage with their neighbours with India in particular to ensure such neighbours do their best to facilitate a solution in Sri Lanka.

The ANC also seeks to build democracy with social content informed by our own concrete conditions and experiences, quest for equality; and promotion of international solidarity.

We therefore need to express our sincere support for the role our government is playing as a humble contribution to a lasting solution to the debacle in Sri Lanka. The first steps of a breakthrough in Zimbabwe are an indication of what our government is capable of.

Let us agree that what may build hope and create confidence for the affected million Tamils and sympathetic Sinhalese is management of future expectations as Brian Senewiratne went on to say “I believed then, and even more so now, that unless the Sinhalese apologise to the Tamils for the outrageous violation of their basic human rights over the past 50 years, there will be no peace, and certainly no peace with friendship, between the ethnic groups in Sri Lanka – divided or undivided. ”

What has the TRC taught us is what the Sri Lankans may have to explore once they

overcome the tragic stubbornness of not negotiating a lasting settlement that we currently witness. Once political sanity prevails, all-embracing remedial action is essential. One of them is to say: we are sorry!

The tragic stance of refusing to recognise and even proscribing the LTTE by certain countries – a similar experience that the ANC and its allies experienced only serves to prolong the suffering of the Tamils in Sri Lanka. Such is a challenge the LTTE has to address with the most meticulous political care and sensitivity to ensure there is resonance between advancing its cause and the broader responsible global leadership. Notwithstanding the authorities in Sri Lanka have to recognise the international solidarity expressed through global bodies such as UN as well.

The need for LTTE and allies to intensify their global drive to present the cause of those suffering is undoubted. The imperative for LTTE and allies to be more responsive to concerns by supporters globally is just as equally important. Intensive interaction between LTTE and global players has never been so crucial. It is therefore in this context that intensification of political offensive over and above military emphasis is an option worth noting.

Revival of all current peace agreements as an interim initiative towards a comprehensive political solution ought to be explored in all possible ways. However let us always remember it is only Sri Lankans who will effectively solve their conflict. Ours is to assist in creating a conducive environment for such endeavours. Returning to negotiations is definitely the best way of paying respect to the 3000 who were massacred on the 25th of July 2008.

One of the greatest challenges is for Sri Lankans to become agents of their own liberation. Confirming this, some Sri Lankan scholars and human rights activists once indicated that: “we should be conscious that a continued inability to be sensitive to and solve problems in our own society could become a weakness fatal to Sri Lanka’s existence as a free and independent nation”.

Any political solution that excludes organisations that enjoy significant support is doomed to failure. It is only the supreme ideas that prevails on the people in any political conflict. What delays the realisation of such eventuality is when the party with greater physical power suffocates prospects for realisation of such supreme ideas. The battles of ideas should therefore assume the centre stage such that Sri Lanka should be allowed to express their support for the best solution without manipulation, coercion or similar manoeuvrings.

The tri-cameral parliamentary system that the apartheid regime introduced in the 1980's not only proved a failure but also backfired in that the masses displayed opposite support.

Amongst a range of crucial role-players, the role of media to conduct itself in a balanced manner and ensure that all parties embroiled in the conflict are given fair opportunity to express their viewpoint has never been so essential. In fact the level of public knowledge about the Sri Lankan conflict in our country is rather disappointing. More than anything it is usually covered in the media as just one of those regular unfortunate conflicts in the world – just one of those that is, from time to time punctuated by incidents of massive killings. A practice that unavoidably feeds into media frenzy which does not by any means assist the world to understand the conflict. It is therefore high time we establish alternative means of publicity whereby our people will understand the root cause, the status quo and viable ways of solving this tragic war.

A clarion call to South Africans to fulfil their internationalist duty by expressing their solidarity with the millions of Tamils suffering in Sri Lanka. I say this because internationalism is a crucial feature in the unique character of the ANC – the leading organization that has openly expressed its concern about the conflict in Sri Lanka and its eagerness to see a speedy solution. Such is inspired by the spirit and ideals of human solidarity. This is an appeal to our consciences.

What are then proposed practical steps in solidarity with the millions of Tamils who are suffering on a daily basis in Sri Lanka? Allow me to share a few proposals viz.:

- Solidarity work in South Africa must assume a national character and the formation of a National Solidarity Forum, comprised of key champions of solidarity work, must be seriously explored;
- An exchange programme between South Africa be established and such should focus on two areas i.e.:
 1. Our Parliaments, both national and provincial, be approached to initiate exchange visits between the two countries;
 2. The Sri Lankan government facilitates an all-encompassing visit by various sectors from South Africa to Sri Lanka as a fact-finding mission;
- An international dialogue be arranged here in South Africa to bring key international players to address the Sri Lankan debacle;
- A session with the newly-appointed Commissioner of UN High Commission for Refugees, Judge Navaneetham Pillay, be arranged to express our expectations on Sri Lanka before she assumes her duty.

As we have always been guided by the ideals of the Freedom Charter our support must always emphasise amongst a lot issues on non-racialism. Solidarity works will be ineffective if it is driven by one race group without visible support by other race groups. Ownership of solidarity work must go beyond racial lines. Such feature needs to be more prominent in South Africa especially with our history of fighting for a non-racial, non-sexist and democratic society.

What is fundamental is an honest and public acknowledgement by all warring parties of the need to enter into an irreversible paradigm of resolving the conflict through peaceful means which essentially going back to negotiations no matter how long such may take. At the same time the dismally untenably grim humanitarian situation has to be reversed as of yesterday. Any one, any leader, any organization contradicting such paradigm, whether through words or deed is not worthy to stand and claim to be a patriot in Sri Lanka.