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GANDHI, MANDELA AND THE AFRIKANERS

I have followed with great interest, admiration, indeed excitement, the courageous efforts of President Nelson Mandela for a reconciliation between the Afrikaners and the African people. He has shown that his determination to build a "rainbow nation" is above transient partisan interests and calculations.

I was privileged on my recent visit to South Africa to meet General Constand Viljoen, Mrs. Melanie Verwoerd and several other Afrikaners in the Government and universities. I was impressed that Mr. Mandela has been able to reach the hearts of many Afrikaners with his broad vision. That to me was one of the most encouraging developments in South Africa, now confronted with problems and challenges.

Nelson Mandela's gestures of friendship and respect to Afrikaners remind me of the spirit of reconciliation preached and practised by Mahatma Gandhi in South Africa and later in India.

In my work at the United Nations against apartheid for more than two decades, I was inspired by Gandhi. I did as much as anyone in my position could do to isolate the apartheid government in South Africa and assist the liberation movements. But eschewing any hatred of the Afrikaners, I counted among my friends not only Afrikaners who detested apartheid but several officials and supporters of the National Party. I was encouraged by U Thant, the Secretary-General who appointed me Principal Secretary of the Special Committee against Apartheid in 1963, and my approach was appreciated by the liberation movement and the African States with whom I was closely associated.

After retirement from the United Nations, I went to the graves of Boer prisoners of war in Ambala, India, laid a wreath and knelt before the gravestone to show that while we abhor apartheid we respect the Afrikaner people - as I reported in an article in "Die Burger" (May 18, 1992). In that article, I pointed out that Mahatma Gandhi, despite the repression he suffered from Afrikaner leaders, had often praised the Afrikaners, including especially the women, for their love of the mother tongue, and for their heroism and sacrifice in the struggle for freedom. I believe that the Afrikaners were among those who influenced Gandhi in his evolution into the leader of the independence struggle in India.

Every nation has in its history and traditions much to be proud of and much to be discarded - and Afrikaners are no exception. The tragedy of the Afrikaners and of South Africa was that after a heroic struggle for freedom, their leaders sought to entrench privilege instead of extending freedom.

They paid no attention to Gandhi who said in a speech in Johannesburg in 1908:

"If we look into the future, is it not a heritage we have to leave to posterity, that all the different races commingle and produce a civilisation that perhaps the world has never seen?"

They ignored the similar vision of Olive Schreiner who wrote in her article on "Closer Union" in the same year:

"If it be possible for us out of our great complex body of humanity (its parts possibly remaining racially distinct for centuries) to raise up a free, intelligent, harmonious nation, each part acting with and for the benefit of others, than we shall have played a part as great as that of any nation in the world's record."

It was by recapturing that vision in the 1950s that the African National Congress became a formidable force and attracted wide international support. There is now the challenge - which Nelson Mandela beckons the nation to face - to march together toward a new civilisation which South Africa, as a microcosm of the world, is uniquely capable of creating.

The Afrikaners are themselves a "rainbow" nation - with their origins going back to the Netherlands, Germany and France in Europe, as well as India and Indonesia in Asia. They have built a civilisation out of these varied heritages and created a language of which they are legitimately proud. If they have now lost the illegitimate power and privilege they enjoyed, that is perhaps to the good - for it is neither ethical nor wise to live on the labour of others which only leads to lethargy. On the other hand, they are no more pariahs on the world scene or in their lands of ancestry; all doors are open to them.

I believe it is time for the Afrikaners to join in rewriting the history of South Africa. The contribution of numerous Afrikaners who debunked the myths of apartheid and practised love of their fellow citizens, thereby facilitating the process of change which resulted in the miracle of 1994, deserves to be recorded and recognised. I am also struck by the amazing similarity between the pro-Boer movement around the world at the turn of the century and the anti-apartheid movement of which I was a part - both of which moved millions of people into solidarity with those struggling for a just cause.

The Afrikaners are not a defeated people. They were defeated in war in 1902, but by their non-cooperation with the British occupation regime and with the solidarity of their friends abroad, they were able to recover their dignity and honour. The liberation movement did not vanquish the last Government and seize power: far-sighted leaders on both sides recognised that apartheid must be buried if an endless conflict bleeding the nation and devastating neighbouring countries were to be averted, and all the people inhabiting South Africa were to be enabled to join in the reconstruction and development of the country.

The political divisions which have arisen in the Afrikaner community in the recent past, as South Africa moved towards a new democratic order, should not be allowed to destroy the essential unity of the "volk" in its mission on this earth - for, I believe, that Volkstaat is far more a matter of spirit than of geography. I hope the Afrikaner people will curb the extremists who are driven by fear and hate, grasp the hand of friendship graciously extended to them by President Mandela, and find pride in building a new civilisation in South Africa as a whole.