

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATE / HERITAGE DAY

17 September 2002 by Ronnie Kasrils MP, Minister of Water Affairs and Forestry

Madam Speaker, Honourable Members

Humans are similar to trees

- we have roots which explain from where we come
- we reach out with our hands to others in friendship – like the branches of the trees spread out to the sun – like the figures in our coat of arms so expressive of Ubuntu. If you cut a tree or a human being the scar remains – to forever remind of the blow. Trees are symbols of life and hope and we have devised a most natural way of remembering those who gave their lives in the struggle for freedom by planting our indigenous trees to their memory so they are never forgotten – we plant such trees to green our land and to heal the nation. We encourage all of our people to plant trees for the birth of a child and in memory of a loved one.

We planted trees yesterday – the 75th Anniversary of Langa Township with the community. We remembered those who had fallen in the struggle – during 1960 at Sharpeville and Langa and again in the 1976 uprising. We remembered the man after which Langa was originally named: King Langalibalele – of the ama Hlubi – who was captured by the British in 1873 and incarcerated on Robben Island because of his rebellion against colonial rule. Incidentally, we have planted trees to the warriors who have fallen in defence of our country in the many wars of our history, those who fell during the colonial wars of dispossession and those gallant Boers who fought against the self-same aggression of British imperialism. Perhaps it is only today that many can more clearly see the Anglo-Boer war, or the South African war as it is more correctly termed, as part of the British imperial power's overall wars of conquest with all our peoples as the victims.

Planting the trees with us at Langa yesterday was Paul Coleman from Manchester, England who a few months ago arrived in our country and walked from Pietermaritzburg to the Johannesburg Summit on Sustainable Development, planting trees on route. Paul is not called the Earthwalker for nothing. He has walked in North and South America, from Canada to Brazil for the 1992 Rio Earth Summit, he has walked in Europe and the Middle East covering 35 000 kilometres and 30 countries. This morning he planted a tree here in Parliament with the Speaker. He will plant a tree on Robben Island and he will soon start out from Cape Town on a four year ramble that will take him through our continent, from Cape Town to Cairo and on to China – literally from the walls of Robben Island to the Great Wall of China. Paul aims to draw attention to the impact of war on humanity and on the natural environment. He has an ambition to persuade people all over the world to plant a tree for each man, woman and child who died in armed conflicts during the 20th century – about 100 million – in national forests of peace and forgiveness. I think we can justifiably refer to him as “a comrade of the road and the trees”.

Paul has already merged with us and our heritage – in the fine words of our national motto: “Ike e:/ xarra // ke – diverse people unite”- because he loves and respects Mother Earth and he loves and respects freedom and equality and fraternity and he expresses himself by walking the world, reaching out to people and planting trees.

Our country expressed this ideal at the World Summit whose programme we are already implementing in many ways even in the simple act of planting trees, ensuring water and food, better health and education for all our people, the eradication of poverty and the care and protection of our environment, so it is a green, healthy environment, which is also the care and protection of our heritage for generations to come.

The heritage handed to us from our past is not simply the symbols of our coat of arms, or the legacy of our rock paintings, our songs, our music, our dance, our cultural and environmental treasures – it is all that but it is also our finest aspirations of freedom, democracy and equality which is what all that reflects and inspires.

So it is the wisdom of centuries of struggle for justice that sees President Mbeki emphasising this week in New York, as the planet is poised for an unnecessary war against Iraq, to emphasise the role of the United Nations as the vehicle for ensuring peace in the world. At this hour of impending war, the USA and Britain rattling their sabres, our President has declared that “the Non-Aligned Movement is committed to the peaceful resolution of all conflicts, including those pertaining to Palestine and Israel, as well as Iraq, in keeping with the resolutions of the United Nations”.

And in the same vein, our former President Nelson Mandela warns the President of the world’s mightiest country to refrain from war and seek other means.

These two famous South Africans, a President and a former President, express at this moment of acute danger to world peace, the essence of our heritage, the wisdom of our history – talk, negotiate, seek the peaceful resolution to conflict – only resort to force where freedom and justice are imperilled and there is no other choice.

As we celebrate our heritage, an inclusive, democratic, non-racist and non-sexist South Africa other dark forces plot and conspire and seek to drag us back into the abyss. The ultra-right conspirators in our country who have recently been uncovered by superb police work are isolated, bankrupt and without significant support. It is highly appreciated, and in the best spirit of our heritage, that leaders of Afrikaner parties in this House have rejected conspiracies to overthrow the government by violence.

Whilst we will not over react to such plots, the plotters and any elements who seek to defy by violence our constitution and rights can be sure that we will defend to the last drop of blood our people’s achievements.

The assegai and iwisa (the knobkierie) in our coat of arms – dual symbols of defence and authority symbolise the wisdom and courage with which we fought for our freedom, and with which we will defend this democracy. Those weapons are as much part of our heritage as our most valuable cultural treasures!

Those conspirators who wish to plunge our country into blood are living in the past, and those like them who remain befuddled by racial poison need to join us in the new South Africa.

If they were with us in Langa yesterday they would have seen how a community has found dignity and is voluntarily involved in greening and cleaning that township.

As we planted the trees with Paul Coleman an all women band played music and sang and a coachload of German tourists stopped to join in the carnival and danced with the community.

The tour guide told me that in the past they would by-pass the townships too afraid to enter. Now they were en-route to a township restaurant and the tourists were flocking into South Africa.

It's the Ubuntu, the white tour lady told me. "What?" I asked, thinking she had said, "It's the Bantu". "It's the spirit of the Ubuntu" she explained, "its drawing the tourists and making them want to come back again". "Yes" I told her, "the spirit of Ubuntu! That is our heritage" and she enthusiastically agreed.

Paul Coleman has experienced this Ubuntu. He talks about how friendly our people are and is optimistic about South Africa and the world.

Paul will amble along the Garden Route – he will enjoy amongst other things of beauty the mountains and the fynbos. He will walk along through the Knysna and Tsitsikamma forests, and Paul, you will see the Amatola Mountains and Forest from where our people fiercely resisted colonial conquest in frontier wars that could be more accurately referred to as The hundred Years War, so determined was the resistance of spear against gun on the Eastern Cape frontier.

When Paul reaches the northern parts of our country at the end of the year he will be able to admire the Baobab tree of the savanna, and obtain vitamin C from the marula fruit and maybe protein from the mopane worm.

Paul, may your spirit be continually uplifted by this beautiful country and wonderful people as you experience our heritage. We call on our people, our mayors and councillors, our communities and learners in our school to give you friendship, protection and hospitality on the road. Thank you for visiting us.

Hamba Kahle – Paul Coleman – Earthwalker – comrade of the road and the trees.