Fifth sitting  
Friday, 8 June 1990, 10.15 a.m.

ADDRESS BY MR. NELSON MANDELA, VICE-PRESIDENT OF THE AFRICAN NATIONAL CONGRESS (ANC)

Original – Spanish: The PRESIDENT – It is an honour for us to welcome here as our guest Mr. Nelson Mandela, the Vice-President of the African National Congress.

To introduce this most distinguished guest, I now call on the Director-General of the International Labour Office, Mr. Michel Hansenne.

Original – French: The SECRETARY GENERAL – It is a great honour and privilege, Sir, to be able to welcome you at the International Labour Conference. It is also unquestionably a tremendous pleasure for our Organisation and for its members, who have been working for some 30 years to secure the abolition of apartheid and to promote the equality of rights in South Africa.

These efforts have taken form in precise studies which, year after year, have analysed the pernicious effects of this abject discrimination on the workers in South Africa. These efforts have also been reflected in in-depth discussions of such problems in the constituent bodies of this Organisation – the Governing Body and the International Labour Conference – where, as you know, governments and workers’ and employers’ associations are represented. They resulted in the adoption of a declaration which has been revised several times and constitutes a real battle plan to do away with apartheid. We have the firm conviction today that the end of this discrimination is at hand. Rest assured, Sir, that we will continue to support all your efforts to build and develop a South Africa based on liberty, equality, and social justice.

We are welcoming here today a militant of liberty and human dignity. For 27 years he was kept away from his family, his friends and his movement; but during his years of detention he always remained close to those who, in his country and elsewhere, were working for the cause of fundamental human rights.

The presence of Mr. Mandela at the beginning of this session of our Conference is thus a unique source of inspiration for all the delegations which, yet again, will be called upon to deal with the problem of apartheid but will also discuss other difficulties in the practical application of the rights of men and women at work. Mr. Mandela’s struggle is our struggle and he will certainly help us to win other battles in favour of equality of rights and respect for work and workers.

During these years of detentions – and this is a paradox – he became a symbol of liberty and a figurehead of peace. What world public opinion notices most is that in spite of his suffering and hardships, he is not bent on taking his revenge at all, but anxious to build rather than to destroy; the world is aware of his serenity and his desire to hold a dialogue.

The presence of Mr. Mandela in this room is the best proof of the appropriate and effective means upon which our institution is based. Social justice, tripartism and dialogue, and the desire to progress through discussion rather than confrontation; these constitute the cornerstone upon which the policy of the International Labour Organisation is built. These are the same principles that Mr. Mandela has been advocating and which today are helping his country move towards better days. The lifting of the state of emergency is in fact the latest sign of this. This confirms that the methods used by our institution are correct and are a great encouragement for us to continue our action for human rights and workers.

Original – Spanish: The PRESIDENT – I now give the floor to our illustrious guest, Mr. Mandela, Vice-President of the African National Congress.

Mr. MANDELA (Vice-President of the African National Congress) – Distinguished President of the International Labour Conference, Director-General of the ILO, honourable delegates and observers, it is a matter of great honour to us that we are able to address this august body, which is one of the most representative institutions within the United Nations system. We thank you most sincerely for your invitation which we believe was inspired by your commitment to the struggle to end the evil system of apartheid.

We bring you the greetings of the National Executive Committee of our organisation, the African National Congress. Our president, Comrade Oliver Tambo, our membership, the mass democratic movement of our country and the masses of our people, as a whole, as before, all of us look forward to the results of your deliberations convinced that you will take new measures which will assist us to move forward rapidly towards our emancipation. We must, however, in the first instance express our deepest appreciation to you all for the struggle you have waged over the years for the release of all South African political prisoners. It is thank to these efforts that I am able to speak to you today. It will be thanks to your efforts that the remaining political prisoners will be released, hopefully in the near future.

Let me assure you that despite the thickness of the prison walls, all of us in Robben Island and other jails could hear your voices demanding our release very
Clearly, we drew inspiration from this. I knew from the very first day of our incarceration that in the end it would prove impossible for the apartheid system to keep us in its dungeons. We thank you that you refused to forget us. We thank you that you did not tire in your struggle. We thank you for your sense of humanity and your commitment to justice which drove you to reject the very idea that we should be imprisoned and that our people should be in bondage.

It seems clear today that the road we still have to travel to arrive at the liberation of our people is not too long. The masses of our people are confident that victory is in sight. Our own liberation from prison is taken as a signal that the people will soon liberate themselves from the larger prison represented by the apartheid system. Indeed, the times have changed. I remember distinctly the arrogant bearing of the captains of the apartheid system when they took power 42 years ago, convinced that they were the elect of God. They went about their business of perpetrating a crime against humanity with unequalled determination, brutality and confidence. They moved forward towards their goal like a juggernaut, crushing everything in their way, ever ready with clever words to present their criminal venture as the very epitome of civilised behaviour. In the end, of course, they became slaves to the goddess of violence and war, and even as they massacred they found words to justify their action and took action to punish even the dead as transgressors of their criminal law. Nobody knows how many are dead that should have been alive. Nobody knows how many children have died in the last 40 years simply because the apartheid system denied them food and good health. None can tell how many bodies lie strewn across southern Africa, the victims of a merciless campaign of repression within South Africa and Namibia, of aggression and destabilisation in the rest of our region. Today, those who have imposed themselves on us as our Government openly admit that their grand design has failed. They say the system of White minority rule must come to an end. The apartheid system can no longer be sustained. It is also thanks to the courage and heroism that the apartheid system can no longer be sustained. Those who were imprisoned have had to be released. Those who were driven into exile shall return to the country of their birth. Those who were condemned to a position of slavery shall be masters of their destiny. The tragedy is that those who were killed by the apartheid system cannot be resurrected.

Today we speak with hope about the prospects of ending the apartheid system. These constitute a tribute to the millions of our people who refused to succumb to tyranny, who refused to fear death, who refused to be enslaved. It is thanks to their courage and heroism that the apartheid system can no longer be sustained. It is also thanks to the courage and heroism of the peoples of southern Africa as a whole, who not only fought for their own emancipation but also refused to be terrorised, to accept the perpetuation of the apartheid system.

History will surely recall that there are very few other issues which united humanity as much as did the opposition of the nations to the apartheid crime against humanity. The actions that the international community took to express its revulsion against this crime are part of the equation of struggle which has taken us to the moment of hope and confidence which we have reached today. In this context, we would like to take this opportunity to salute the ILO for its enormous contribution to our common struggle. The actions you took which resulted in the withdrawal of South Africa from the ILO a quarter of a century ago, and what you have done since then, are important elements in the common efforts of all humanity to isolate and by this means destroy the system of apartheid.

And so, where are we today? The situation suggests that it would be possible for our people, through their political representatives, to enter into negotiations for the transformation of South Africa into a united, democratic and non-racial country. But for this to happen, a climate conducive to negotiations has still to be created. As you know, on the initiative of the ANC, we met President de Klerk and his colleagues in Cape Town at the beginning of last month. The purpose of that meeting was to address the issue of the removal of the obstacles that stood in the way of the process of negotiations. At the end of the meeting, we were happy to announce that agreement had been reached on the removal of all the obstacles that we have identified, and which the rest of the world has also recognised as obstacles that needed to be removed.

We are encouraged that even yesterday President de Klerk announced the lifting of the state of emergency over the greater part of the country, as well as the release of another group of political prisoners. These steps constitute part of the process of implementing what was agreed a month ago. Of course, more will have to be done to ensure that the agreement is implemented in full. We are confident that this will be done and it should be done as a matter of urgency. As was agreed in Cape Town, we shall continue to press for this result. We are confident that you will therefore persist in your own demands that all political prisoners must be released, political trials ended, the exiles returned, repressive legislation repealed and the state of emergency ended in its entirety. We make these points not to question the bona fides of the leadership of the South African Government. Indeed, we have said it in the past and believe it to be true that President de Klerk and his colleagues are men and women of integrity. We accepted their good faith that they will abide by what was agreed. But until what was agreed has been done, we cannot afford to lower our guard in the belief that the promise has become real.

Indeed, we should make the point here that not everybody in our country has as yet accepted that a negotiated resolution of our problems is the best way forward. There are many among our White compatriots who are determined to resist change arms in hand. The continuing violence of the police against unarmed people is the tip of the iceberg which illustrates the dangers we face from those who are committed to the perpetuation of White privilege and domination. We must, in this context, also mention the continuing senseless carnage that is taking place in the Province of Natal. We have made it very clear to the Government that they must discharge their responsibility and end this violence. We, for our part, will continue to do everything in our power to solve this problem by peaceful means, whatever the obstacles in our way. We would like to take this opportunity to urge you to support the international campaign initiated by our democratic movement, to draw attention to this situation and to generate the necessary pressure to oblige the South African Government to end the killing of our people. You should know that
There are present in this hall representatives of our major trade union federation, COSATU, who have come out in part to take up this issue of Natal violence. With the removal of the obstacles to negotiation, it would then be possible to bring all the representatives of political forces in the country together, to agree on all the necessary measures which would lead to the elaboration and adoption of a democratic constitution.

In this regard, we would like to inform you that, more than ever before, the ANC is determined to ensure the broadest possible unity of all those within our country who are opposed to apartheid. Indeed, the ANC is committed to making every effort to ensure that there be a common, non-racial voters' roll. We believe this to be fundamental to any democratic system. We are, however, also aware that many of our White compatriots fear change, but we also know that no permanent, just and stable resolution can ever be arrived at if a new political system continues to entrench White privilege simply because White South Africa is afraid of losing its privileged position.

Our policy is clear: that every South African citizen should have a right to his language, culture and religion. We are also committed to the view that the new democratic constitutional arrangement should include an entrenched bill of rights, which should be justiciable and which would be monitored by an independent judiciary. We are convinced that measures such as these, as well as others, including the institution of a democratic system of regional and local government, are sufficient to guarantee the democratic rights of all our people, without discrimination based on race, colour, sex or creed.

It is equally obvious that serious measures would also have to be taken to address the issue of ensuring that our economy benefits all our people.

As you all know, millions of our people are condemned to a life of misery and deprivation, without food, housing, clothing, education, jobs and access to health care. At the same time, others live opulent lives.

While not seeking to impoverish anybody, quite clearly we have to address the issue of those who are deprived with the greatest vigour. In this context, we wish to make this undertaking: that the new South Africa will have to ratify the Conventions that the ILO has adopted over the decades, to ensure that the humane purposes intended by the promulgation of those Conventions are realised in our country as well.

We have tried, very briefly, to indicate some of our perspectives concerning what we are struggling to achieve in our country. What we have spoken of in terms of the political and economic system is still in the future. Today's reality is that the apartheid system, in all its principal elements, is still in place. We are still ruled by a white minority Government. Millions of our people are still confined in bantustan's and other group areas. In other words, fundamental change has not yet taken place. The struggle must therefore continue. In this respect, we wish to emphasise that it is our firm belief that sanctions must be maintained. Sanctions were imposed as a peaceful means to end apartheid. Given the fact that apartheid has not ended, it is only logical that we should continue to use this weapon of struggle.

As we have indicated, we are of course very conscious of the need to develop the South African economy so that it is able to provide for the needs of all our people. This is going to require massive international intervention if we are to move forward at a pace that recognises the urgency of the needs of our people. What this emphasises is that there is every need to move as rapidly as possible to end the system of apartheid, so that the need for sanctions falls away.

Last December, a special session of the United Nations General Assembly decided unanimously that sanctions would not be lifted until profound and irreversible changes had taken place, leading to the transformation of South Africa into a non-racial democracy.

No such change has as yet taken place. It is therefore important that the international community maintain its positions on the issue of sanctions. But clearly, we must also begin to look to the future. South Africa will be free. Peace will reign supreme in our region, despite the stubborn resistance of some elements to the peace initiative of the Government of Angola and Mozambique. When we have cleared these remnants of a cruel and inhuman past, then it will be time to attend to the matter of the reconstruction of our country and region to meet the material and spiritual needs of all our people.

Many years ago now the General Assembly of the United Nations took the decision that it had a special responsibility towards the people of South Africa. It adopted this position because it recognised the unique manner in which the scourge of racism had established itself in our country. By assuming a special responsibility, it was expressing the view that the elimination of the apartheid system of racial arrogance and supremacy was critical to the elimination of racism everywhere. We believe that even after the political transformation that we all seek has been achieved, this special responsibility of the international community will continue to be relevant. This is so because it will be necessary to repair the damage caused by the apartheid system, both in South Africa and in the rest of Southern Africa.

It will be important to ensure that within South Africa, as in Germany after the Second World War, the necessary democratic institutions are put in place so that racial tyranny does not raise its ugly head again.

We are going to require your continued political and material assistance with regard to all these matters as well as our continuing struggle. I think we are safe in assuming that the ILO will not fail us. I say this because you have already established a tradition of assistance to and co-operation with us, which we are certain will continue. We are obliged to you for the assistance you have given us with regard to the training of our trade unionists as well as some of our skilled personnel. In this regard we would also like to extend our thanks to you for the assistance you extended to our democratic trade union movement, which made it possible for them to reach agreement with the South African employers to change their repressing Labour Relations Act. We now await government action on this matter so that this important agreement is translated into law.
We want to build a system of co-operation with all nations so that the liberated South Africa itself becomes a force of peace, friendship and social progress throughout the world. We believe that our people of all colours, with all their talents and genius, have an important contribution to make to the realisation of this universal objective. This once more underlines the urgency with which we have to move to get rid of the apartheid system which makes this international intercourse impossible.

Mr. President, and dear friends, thank you very much for receiving us with such warmth. Thank you very much for listening to us with such kind attention. Let us walk the last mile together. Let us together turn into reality the glorious vision of a South Africa free of racism. Free of racial antagonisms among our people. No longer a threat to peace. No longer the skunk of the world. Our common victory is certain. Thank you.

Original – Spanish: The President – Mr. Mandela, while listening to you, I had the clear impression that I was living a privileged moment of my life. The clarity of your thinking, the sincerity of your dedication to a just cause, the sacrifice of your whole lifetime to fighting for the freedom of all those of your race, move us deeply.

You have been introduced to the Conference by the Director-General of the ILO in very full terms. You have implanted to us the essence of your philosophy. It is incumbent upon me as President of the Conference to thank you and bid you farewell, but I should not like to do so without referring, if you will so allow me, to certain aspects of your life which have particularly impressed me.

A periodical with a world-wide circulation recently reported an anecdote you had told about your first real contact with the Whites. One day, you said, you were dictating something to a White secretary, when a client came in who was also White. Visibly embarrassed, your secretary, to show that she was not your employee, took two pennies out of her purse and said to you:

"Nelson, please go out and buy me some shampoo."

That was when you became aware of your status as a member of an unjustly segregated race. Your rebellion against that injustice has made you exceptionally well qualified to speak for your brothers in misfortune and bear witness to their distress.

To this, you have devoted your life, of which that anecdote is merely a tiny fragment; your thinking is more powerful still. In your book entitled No easy walk to freedom, you said that you would not leave South Africa, nor surrender; that freedom could only be won through privation, sacrifice and militant action; that the struggle was your life and that you would continue struggling until the end of your days.

What inspiring words these are; what a splendid lesson in selfless devotion you have taught us in paying with 27 years’ imprisonment for your faithfulness and unswerving adherence to an ideal of justice and freedom. I can pay this tribute to you with the sincerity and understanding of someone who has himself been put in prison, though for a much shorter time, because of his commitment to the humanitarian ideals proclaimed in the Preamble to the ILO Constitution.

Mr. Nelson Mandela, on behalf of this distinguished assembly, I express our deep gratitude to you for honouring us with your presence. I shall not say “Goodbye” but “See you soon”, when, in your country, men are no longer Black or White but brothers who are equal and free.

(The sitting was suspended at 10.45 a.m. and resumed at 11.15 a.m.)