

Press statement

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Justice and Reconciliation built on accountability

I would like to thank my hosts in Switzerland for inviting me to participate in their campaign this year. The slogan for this year's campaign "Wir glauben. Gewalt hat nicht das letzte Wort" suggest that there are alternative ways of dealing with conflict and building peace other than with violence.

Today I would like to begin by telling you that more than 10 years ago, South Africa chose another way. We chose to walk the path of reconciliation using accountability and justice as the basis for our journey to freedom rather than revenge. We had emerged from 300 years of injustice in which law was used to perpetrate gross human rights violations against the majority of our people.

In South Africa a negotiated settlement paved the way for peace. We could have chosen to prosecute those who had perpetrated violations against the people of South Africa, instead we chose to offer them amnesty. We knew that we had to make a choice, forever living imprisoned and poisoned by the bitter memories of our experiences of the past, or choosing to rise above our suffering and finding ways to live together but also to find our common humanity.

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission was that choice. It offered perpetrators the opportunity to become human again and it offered victims the opportunity to tell their stories and to have an acknowledgment of what they had suffered. It also offered all South Africans the opportunity to look into a mirror and to explore their own roles and complicity during the apartheid period.

When the victims first spoke in South Africa, White South Africa said that "it could not be true, the victims were exaggerating". When the perpetrators started speaking, White South Africa said "we did not know that this was happening". Of course the challenge for us is how we change the current discourse into an acknowledgement by the beneficiaries that 'they did know and that they chose not to do anything'.

Of course the beneficiaries of apartheid are not only those inside the country. They are also the governments across the world who ignored the Call for sanctions, the multinationals like the banks and insurance companies who profited from apartheid and who continued to support and fund the activities of the apartheid government.

I need to reiterate that this issue is not about raising guilt in order to obtain money, it is about building a human rights culture and about creating a new global order which is based on honesty and truth. It is about knowledge and acknowledgement before we move to reconciliation. Reconciliation should not be cheap or about hugging and kissing. It is about the hard issues of accountability which is at the heart of a rights based approach.

The thrust of my message today is that South Africa and Switzerland go back a long way. However this relationship has not only been about solidarity between those who fought against apartheid. It is also about those who were in solidarity with the former government such as the banks and the multinationals who supported the structural violence that was the legacy of apartheid. While the world had declared apartheid a crime against humanity, many continued to trade and to finance. When none would extend credit to the apartheid government, Swiss banks led the way in bringing the worlds' bankers together to give the apartheid government a lifeline. They did this without extending any conditionality to the loans. In the period that followed after, South Africa experienced the worst level of repression against the vast majority of the people. It is also about the collaboration between the military. What was Colonel Regli's relationship with Dr. Wouter Basson. Why was our chemical and biological warfare expert arrested in Switzerland in the possession of Vatican bearer bonds. Why did so many Swiss churches support the illegitimate regime of the former government, as well as their policy on the homelands. How come Chief Mangosuthu Buthelezi received so much support even as he was responsible for the violence of the 1990's?

We do not know all the answers and it is important that we do. And it for this reason that I call upon ordinary citizens of Switzerland during this campaign to reflect on what the nature of our future relationship should be. In my view it should be based on truth and justice and on the solidarity of ordinary decent people who believe that another world is possible. Ordinary Swiss citizens should join together and should clamour for truth and justice. It starts with knowledge and an acknowledgement. It is for this reason that we should call for a joint Swiss South African project on opening the archives of both countries so that we can learn about what was the nature of the relationship between our countries at the highest and lowest levels.

Once we know about the past, we can acknowledge wrongdoing and build a basis for reconciliation. It is after all about accountability. We have come the full circle and having come so far should close it by creating new beginnings based on truth, accountability and ultimately justice.