

*All Protocol observed.*

Ambassador Nkosi,

Excellencies,

Distinguished guests,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am honoured to take part in this Memorial service. And at the same time feel humble to honour a man who has taken up an extraordinary challenge. A man who has succeeded in his ambition, thereby establishing a moral authority which has remained with him till his death. President Mandela has been praised highly by so many, from all ranks and file, from all corners off the earth, and rightly so. So I think modesty is indeed called for, when speaking about a Nobel Peace Prize laureate, who said of himself that he was not a prophet but just a humble servant.

Allow me to use the words of the Belgian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Didier Reynders, who in his reaction about the passing away of President Mandela referred to him as (quote) “an icon of peace, reconciliation and visionary statesmanship, reaching far beyond his term as first President of a democratic South Africa. Under his leadership, South Africa saw an end to apartheid and the restoration of human dignity. He succeeded in peacefully

transforming a deeply divided country into a Rainbow Nation, often personally and physically paying a high price along this Long Walk to Freedom” (end of quote).

Our deepest sympathies and heartfelt condolences at this time are with the Mandela family with his friends, and with the entire people of South Africa.

Nelson Mandela’s belief in freedom and equality of all men and women inspired his lifelong fight against injustice and oppression. His willingness to enter in dialogue and seek compromise, giving the opponent the chance to engage and obtain ownership, was remarkable and nearly unprecedented, definitely during the dark ages of South Africa’s apartheid regime. Rather than striving for revenge, he reached out to his opponents. Even learning their language while being in prison, giving them the chance to change and to work together for a better future for all South Africans. His actions were not inspired by hatred but by the conviction that only a shared solution would bring lasting peace.

It all looks very natural today. A South Africa with democratic institutions supported by a constitution. But it was not at all the case some 20 years ago. And just like in many other countries, keeping up democracy and the Rule of Law remains an ongoing task. Although President Mandela will not be there anymore to guard and protect his legacy, his spirit will always remain part of South Africa’s soul, and will continue to inspire the many who will

follow and have already followed in his footsteps, further cementing the principles of a free and democratic South Africa.

Nelson Mandela's beliefs, however, did not stop at South Africa's borders. His message is of a universal nature. While institutionalizing democracy human rights in his own country as the first democratically elected President, his moral authority reached much further. To places where there was conflict and turmoil, as was the case with countries like the Democratic Republic of Congo and Burundi, just to name those two.

Belgium is particularly attached to Africa, through its history, but equally because of the lively interest of its citizens for this fascinating continent. Under the presidency of Nelson Mandela it soon became clear that Belgium and South Africa would join hands in their shared commitment for peace in Africa, particularly in the Region of the Great Lakes.

Since 1994 relations between South Africa and Belgium have continuously grown stronger. Many contacts at the highest political level have taken place since, leading to cooperation in a wide range of areas. Only some weeks ago, HRH Princess Astrid lead a Belgian mission to South Africa. In the same way as her brother, HRH King Philippe, then Crown Prince, had done in 1995 and 2006. It was symbolic for the excellent relations between both countries that on those occasions, the future King actually met President Mandela.

Mandela's legacy is a universal message of solidarity and respect for our fellow man and women. But also a message of openness and tolerance, even for those who we perceive as our enemies.

We talk a lot these days about best practices or lessons learned. Today it is befitting to reflect on how we can benefit from Nelson Mandela's best practices, of the lessons he left us, in dealing with people who are of a different opinion, color or culture. We learned that a pervading sense of justice, is essential. But not enough. We need to accompany it with the patience to listen and with the wisdom to compromise without giving up the basic principles of human dignity and human rights.

Hamba Kahle Mandela (*rust in vrede Mandela – Xhosa*)