



Statement by Zwelakhe Sisulu on the Occasion of the 20th Anniversary of the Founding of ARTICLE 19

Delivered in London on 11 December, 2008

I greet you all on this occasion of the 20th anniversary of ARTICLE 19. The past 20 years have been years of momentous events and in the 20 years since its founding ARTICLE 19 rose to majestic heights to challenge some of the most repressive regimes in modern times.

ARTICLE 19 is an organisation that for many has made the difference between life and death, between pain and the ignominy of a lonely death. A lonely and helpless death in a bloodied and cold cell. The men and women of ARTICLE 19 have worked tirelessly to expose before the whole world the brutality and man's inhumanity to man.

ARTICLE 19 came into being at a time in the world when repression was at its height and when the proverbial light at the end of the tunnel was growing dimmer and dimmer with each passing day. It was a time of some of the most heroic struggles around the world. The fall of the Berlin wall and in my own country, South Africa, with the ultimate defeat of apartheid.

All the struggles, triumphant as they were, came at a huge cost and loss of life. All of these struggles were met with a cold, ferocious force by regimes that knew that their days were numbered. The last kicks of a dying horse, we used to call it.

For myself and thousands of my generation, we had grown up in a South Africa that led us to one conclusion which was; to fight or to succumb to the tyranny of apartheid. We chose to fight. Whatever the consequences. It was a conviction that was summed up so eloquently by Nelson Mandela when he said at his Rivonia trial in 1963:

"I am against white racism as I am against black racism. I will fight for a non-racial democratic South Africa until we get it or until I die."

This was indeed the daily mantra of my generation. Today South Africa faces new challenges and a new set of conditions. What, however, is not in doubt is that the non-racial democracy that Mandela spoke of is now solidly in place and unshakeable.

There are thousands of us across the world who survived some of the worst harrowing conditions in apartheid jails and others in the world caught in similar conditions. One of the interesting ironies of history is that any set of repressive condition triggers an

opposing force to rid itself of such. ARTICLE 19 was one of those human rights organisations that emerged particularly because of “*mans’ inhumanity to man.*” It is a good example of the organisations that came into being in the latter part of the 20th century, committed to the freedom of expression for all peoples of the world.

I have come to London to be with the brave men and women who founded ARTICLE 19 and those who continue to do its sterling work as the observance of this 20th anniversary highlights.

I have come to say to you, "*Thank you. Thank you for what you did for me and hundreds of my countrymen. Without your help I would probably not be standing here in front of you today. Thank you for your caring.*"

Indeed I salute you on behalf of all of those who survived. I salute you also on behalf of those who did not survive. I salute you too, for the work you continue to do, for those who continue to suffer in the dark dungeons of the jails of tyrants. Those who do not know the difference between daybreak and sunset, because they are locked in these miserable holes. I do so hoping that they too, like myself, will one day experience the glittering daybreak of freedom, justice and peace.

My Personal Story

My personal story begins with an eventful evening one day at my home in Dube, Soweto, on a starless night in 1988. I was then editor of the weekly newspaper called The New Nation, a weekly which engaged in robust journalism that immensely displeased the apartheid government. On this particular day a group of security policemen knocked down the wall outside my house with a military vehicle and burst into my dining room. There were six of them, all wearing ski masks. I was forcibly removed from my home in front of my wife and children and taken to a vacant lot outside Soweto where I was kept in the military vehicle for a couple of hours while the police cranked their walkie-talkies this way and that way in an apparent process to determine my fate. I believed that I had come here to die. I had come to terms with the fact that shortly I would be shot. I accepted my fate as I so understood it calmly. I now know what goes through people's minds before they die. A strange calmness came over me. It was not a calmness of the physical body, but a more elevated and spiritual calmness. I felt nothing. I thought nothing. After what seemed like a lifetime, the police, to my relief, decided to take me to the notorious John Vorster Square where I spent the next two years in a violent solitary confinement. Solitary confinement is one of the worst forms of torture as it eats away at the very core of your humanity.

In the outside world nobody knew where I was or whether I was alive. Police and the army denied any knowledge of me or my whereabouts. My family was at a loss. All inquiries drew a blank. I was to all intent and purposes a dead person.

Years later Nelson Mandela, who was then imprisoned on Robben Island with my father, Walter Sisulu, would tell me that when they heard the news of my abduction they had come to terms with the fact that I was, in all probability, dead.

It was this particular spate of detentions that led numerous human rights organisations, in particular ARTICLE 19, to launch a campaign highlighting my plight throughout the western world. It was this campaign, I believe, that ultimately led to my release from jail sentence. Upon being released I was served with a banning order which meant that I would not continue with my work as a journalist and editor. I could not be employed and I was held on a 12 hour house arrest which meant I could not leave the house between 6.00 pm and 6.00 am for whatever reasons. This you will understand was a major burden for me as I was raising young children who constantly needed medical care.

With the changing conditions in the country I later returned to my newspaper and edited the paper until the release of Nelson Mandela when I left the paper to become Mandela's media spokesperson. All in all I spent seven years at different times in detention without charge or trial. I was never convicted, nor was I ever charged. I was never, ever given reasons for my detentions and subsequent banning but I always assumed that it was because of my brand of journalism, fearless and determined to get to the truth.

Freedom of Expression

At the centre of all my problems with the apartheid government was the fact that I refused as a journalist to be robbed of my rights to express my own thoughts and those of my community fearlessly and without favour. I refused to compromise on all of these principles of a free press, the freedom of expression, to free our family, the freedom of assembly and the freedom of association and all the freedoms that go toward making a free and just democracy.

Even today in the changed circumstances of my country since apartheid, my commitment to these freedoms have not dimmed.

Sadly one of the tendencies of emerging democracies is that the fighters for freedom, who in many countries included journalists like myself, are prone to be just as repressive upon assuming power, seeing a robust free press as the new threat in their political lives. Today South Africa boasts one of the freest presses in the world. But as we all know, no freedom should be taken for granted because any freedom that is not stoutly advanced and diligently defended will be challenged, abused and ultimately go into decay.

It may very well be that the proliferation of new technologies and media outlets that we are currently experiencing may mean that the rights to freedom of expression are now more guaranteed than at any other time in human experience.

This does not mean, however, that those who cherish freedom of expression should lower their guards.

Freedom of expression must be built on the back of the free access to information upon which free citizens rely on to develop informed opinions.

Coming from a new democracy as I do, and coming from an impoverished continent I do need to raise some disquiet about how those with the material means are able to

monopolise major vehicles of freedom of expression to the exclusion of those that do not have those means. The major motors of freedom of expression, mainly newspapers, radio and television, are for the most part inaccessible to the majority who are poor.

From my point of view freedom of expression should not be limited to those with the means but rather it should lead to a marshalling of resources by both government and the private sector to create such organs of freedom of expression, and this you could say is the political economy of freedom of expression.

Having gone through all the experiences that I have outlined to you, I am sometimes asked, if given the chance as a journalist, whether I would do things differently with hindsight. And my short answer always is a resounding capital NO! I still believe as steadfastly as I did in the freedom of the press and the freedom of expression. I believe in these as the only way that can guarantee the free flow of ideas which, after all, are the driving force in the development of human society.

Over the past two decades since my incarceration my life has changed quite significantly. I am now in business and I am a media owner. This ownership includes a significant book publishing business in South Africa called David Philip. Itself is a stalwart in the fight against apartheid. I am also involved in television including a community television channel in Soweto called Soweto TV. So I remain close to the world of media, still believing in the critical role of a free media and the transformation of their society such as the one I live in.

Many governments in Africa, including my government in my country, are now fighting a rear guard action to establish what is generally known as viewing centres where communities, particularly in rural areas, go to a central point which is a community centre with electricity where they are able to communally view television, listen to radio and get access to the internet. All these efforts are aimed at ensuring that the population is informed because, as I have said, to the extent that our people will make the right decisions, to the extent that our people will be able to embrace freedom of expression and use freedom of expression in a productive way to build society and communities, to that extent people must have access to information. If they do not have access to information then, I think, we need to say that indeed the principle of freedom of expression becomes an end in itself when in fact it should be used as a tool to build democracy.

South Africa Now

South Africa is currently going through an interesting political phase with an emergence of new political parties. In some quarters this has caused some alarm and anxiety. Those who once sat together on the same side of the political divide are now implacable foes. Those who were in struggle together now sit on the opposite ends of the political divide. I believe that this development is not a threat to the stability of our country but rather a deepening of our short democratic experience. South Africa has the character and resolve to embrace this new development and to add it to its armour of our Rainbow Nation under a rainbow and culturally diverse democracy.

It was Martin Luther King who commented that, "*A man dies if he refuses to stand up for that which is right.*" In my life I have refused to be intimidated and I have always felt the need to stand up. I know, too, that ARTICLE 19 has always stood up for those countless men and women across the world who have been victimised and punished for advancing the principle of democracy and freedom of expression. It is important that the peoples of the world are always alive to the challenge and the need to stand up for the truth and that which is right.

I would like to close this address by reminding you of the profound words of Pastor Nemulla at a difficult time in Europe when he said of the Germany of his time during the Second World War:

"They came for the communists. Because I was not a communist I did not speak up. They came for the students and because I was not a student I did not speak up. And when they came for me there was nobody left to speak up for me."

I would like to say now the new universe is a universe of the information society. It is a universe that we walk into without rancour without misgivings. It is a universe that will empower all those people and societies that have been disempowered. It is a universe that we walk into with great confidence with all the understandings that this is the new society. As an African, I believe, this will be the society that will encumber all our people and rescue all our people. I hope that I speak for my generation and my children and their grandchildren that this information society is indeed what we always endeavoured.

Thank you for your time.