

Remarks by President Thabo Mbeki at the UNSC Press Conference

New York, 16 April 2008

Remarks by President Thabo Mbeki

Good afternoon ladies and gentlemen, let me say I think everybody in the room is very familiar with the fact that Africa absorbs the bulk of the peace and security activities of the United Nations - 60% of the UN operations in international peace and security involve Africa and I am told that something like 75% of the UN forces on peacekeeping are on the African continent.

So, the issue of peace and stability is a critically important one on the continent - a matter that we have to deal with everyday and indeed, with the support of the United Nations - that therefore it would be important to look at this matter of how the African continent and the UN work together or should work together to produce better results for greater efficacy with regard to these matters of international peace and security.

That is why we thought we should take this initiative to call this high-level meeting so that both the African Union and the United Nations in particular the Security Council, could have a look at this question: what is it that should be done that would improve the efficacy of our co-operation with regard to these issues.

We have been very pleased with the high-level attendance at this meeting because of the African side you saw that the current Chairperson of the African Union President Kikwete was here, the current chairperson of African Union Peace and Security Council President Meles Zenawi was here, the chair of the African Union Commission was here - so you had the leadership of the African Union at this level at this meeting. Off course the members of the AU Peace and Security Council are here and will continue an engagement with their UN counterparts tomorrow and off course, you had the attendance of members of the UN Security Council - in general, you had good attendance.

And happily an agreement that:

1. There is a need to strengthen the African capacity to address these matters and therefore the institutions of the African Union need to be strengthened;
2. There is a need to strengthen the co-operation between the UN and the African Union on these matters and this would include looking at all other questions that might have served to weaken or blunt the efficacy of the co-operation between the UN and the AU and this specific outcome which would be reflected in the resolution that would be adopted today is we have all agreed that the Secretary-General of the UN Ban Ki-Moon would within the next three months set up a joint High-Level Panel of people from the UN and the AU who would then make specific proposals on what should be done - in fact, to both, improve the capacity of the African Union and to improve the efficacy of the co-operation between the AU and the UN and that would include matters of financing, training of people and so on. Everybody has agreed that that Panel should be established so that they can work very quickly so that out of the meeting we have specific outcomes that would govern the manner in which this question is handled.

So, the meeting has gone very well. It was very pleasing to hear people from across the world agree that the matter is important, needs to be addressed urgently and we need to act together because everybody shares this common interest to improve this situation of peace and security on the African continent.

Thank you

Questions and answers

Question President Mbeki, during the debate there was no opposition to the fact that the world has to help the African Union to strengthen the peacekeeping capabilities. The only thing they want to raise is that Africa must be credible in terms of human rights and democracy and democracy in Zimbabwe was the focus of many Western governments this morning. The UN Secretary-General proposed that you accept international supervision of the elections in Zimbabwe - I would like to ask your opinion on this matter?

Answer That is a matter that must be raised with the government of Zimbabwe - this is not a matter that anybody else on the continent would be able to address. This must be put to the government of Zimbabwe and I am not sure what they would do.

You know we have the region of southern Africa - SADC that has been dealing with this matter already and we have had this first round of elections and essentially are awaiting the announcement of the Presidential results.

Everybody, including the people of the region, who met in Lusaka, Zambia over the weekend - everyone was saying that it is essential that these results be released. Everybody around the world is of one mind on this because we can then see what comes out of this. If those results indicate that no-one has won an absolute majority that is required - 50% + 1 -then obviously, according to the law, a second round will be required so again, as our own region, we would want to ensure and we said this that even if this second round takes place it needs to be handled as the first one was handled. There was no violence, everybody was allowed and free to campaign everywhere in the country and so on. We would have to sustain this kind of atmosphere. That would be our position.

But the matter as to the involvement of the UN, is a matter that must be raised by the UN with one of its member states - Zimbabwe is a member state.

Question President Thabo Mbeki, given that the results are not actually out yet, how concerned were you that several members of the Council referred to Zimbabwe in their speeches in the Security Council - if the situation deteriorates further, do you think it could be on the agenda of the UN Security Council as a threat to international peace and security?

Answer I am quite sure that if it became a threat to international peace and security that it would legitimately be on the agenda of the UN Security Council. I think that if everybody, given the sustained focus on Zimbabwe for many years now, is keen that this electoral process must be completed and indeed, I think that people have appreciated the manner in which the elections took place and they do want this matter completed, as does South Africa but as to what would happen in the future, I am not sure.

Question Mr President, do you think some of the speakers in the Security Council were premature in mentioning Zimbabwe in their speeches - do you think it was a matter of putting the horse before the cart?

Answer There was no censorship - people are quite free to raise whatever issue they wish to. But of course, understanding that the meeting had been convened to discuss the matter as I had explained and the resolution would address that matter but I think that if people feel they have to say something about it they were quite free to do so.

Question Mr President, many Western countries are very loud and direct in their criticism in what has been happening in Zimbabwe. I notice that yourself and some of your colleagues are taking a more diplomatic approach to the situation. Can you explain the rationale behind your approach?

Answer If you take our case, you would know that we have been dealing with this question of Zimbabwe for some years now and essentially, what we have been saying for many years is that the solution to the

problem in Zimbabwe lies in the hands of the people of Zimbabwe and therefore in our engagement with the situation, we needed to talk continuously at all times with both the ruling party and the opposition because it is them who would have to agree on behalf of their country on where to go.

That was formalised by the SADC when they formally asked us to facilitate the process which is what we have been doing and will continue to do. I don't believe, you would know this also, we have handled many conflict situations on the continent - Burundi, DRC, Côte d'Ivoire and Comores, amongst others - and we have never thought that we could reach agreement in a situation of negotiation by negotiating through the media, with all respect to the media.

But if you want to produce a result when people are negotiating, you talk to them, not yell at them. You sit down with them, outline the problem and ask if we can discuss.

Take the Zimbabwe situation: you sit with the ruling party and the opposition, we say there are serious political problems in Zimbabwe, we have to solve these problems - can you two agree on the agenda, put on the agenda any question that you think should be discussed and no one has the right of veto to say that we do not want this matter or that. They did this, we put together an agenda and said fine. We sat and discussed -the laws, the constitution, this, that - the laws were changed, a new constitution was negotiated. So this is what we have to do.

Maybe someone far away may have a different responsibility to Zimbabwe and may do something different - yell and so on. But South Africa has a different responsibility - we are immediate neighbours and have to see in what ways we can contribute to get the Zimbabweans to agree.

Like the elections they have just had - the rules and regulations on how to handle that election, please let's not beat one another up, let's not have no-go areas, police must behave, what do you do about the public order and safety act, what do you do about the broadcasting act, all of these things, you have to sit and discuss with them and agree as was agreed and then act.

So this may explain the way in which people may behave differently.

Question Mr President, African nations are increasingly co-operating with each other in terms of trade and investment within the concept of South-South co-operation. To what extent is this successful in Africa?

Answer You would know that the continent is divided, essentially for this purpose, into five regions - we have the southern African development community which consists of 14 countries, and indeed it is based on the need for us to co-operate in the manner in which we are indicating.

For instance, one of the agreements we have is to create a free trade area for all of these 14 countries - a trade protocol was negotiated and agreed upon so that we create that free trade area that would lead to a customs union and so on. And that is what is happening in the different parts of the African continent.

From there you expand that so you have co-operation from region to region but we start within the regions. This is the same principle of this South-South co-operation.

Question Mr President, what about the India-Africa Summit held earlier this month? Were there any outcomes?

Answer Both the African continent and India felt they needed to also address that matter of co-operation between Africa and India so there are various agreements that have been reached, for instance, India has agreed that immediately they would provide duty free quota free access to products from all of the least developed countries, the majority of which, off course, are African so this comes into immediate

effect so a whole number of least developed countries on the African countries are now free to export everything and anything, duty free and quota free, to India to assist with Africa's development, things like this.

The Indian government has also increased its credit lines to the African continent so that they can access things that have to do with productive development, etc so there is a whole range of agreements of this kind.

Question Mr President, there is a lot of concern in this country and in the EU and Canada about Durban II. Can you address these concerns particularly in regard to the fact that the US walked out of Durban I?

Answer With regard to Durban II, as far as I know, there is still no agreement as to the venue of that Conference - there has not been any finality on this matter.

As a country, we are off course, interested in a follow up with regard to this matter of the struggle against racism because we believe it is still a very serious problem. We are interested in a follow up on this and indeed it would be good if there could be some follow up Conference which addresses the matter and would hope that this time round, no body would stay away because this is a serious problem - this problem of racism and really, it would be good if and when this conference is held, wherever it is held, that everybody participates.

Question Mr President, you are famously quoted as saying there is no crisis in Zimbabwe. Is there?

Answer I have heard this story of my saying there is no crisis in Zimbabwe but I don't know where this comes from. I never said any such thing. I honestly don't know where this comes from.

What happened is that we were in Harare on Saturday where I had to see President Mugabe in Harare regarding some of the issues raised by the opposition.

The media was there as I left and they asked me about the elections - was what was happening with regard to the elections a crisis? So I asked them to look at what has happened - election campaign has taken place, there is general agreement that it was fine, municipal results have been announced with no problem, the senate results have been announced with no problem, the house of assembly results announced with no problem, dispute about 23 out of 207 seats is a matter that must be finalized. The presidential results have not been announced. So that is what has happened with regard to the elections and then at that point, the High Court was to respond to some application regarding the Presidential results. So I suggested we wait for the High Court decision - we do not know what the outcome will be. The Electoral Commission also needs to announce its results. So that is where we are with regard to the elections.

So the second question raised was that, you are on your way to Lusaka to attend a meeting of the region. Did President Manawasa say there is a crisis?

I replied by saying, what he said to me was that we needed to meet to assess the situation in Zimbabwe in order to see what we can do to assist and that is all.

This story that I said there is no crisis, I do not have the slightest clue of where it comes from. The question was about the elections - it was not about the socio-economic conditions in Zimbabwe or anything like that. The journalists quite naturally were interested in the elections and asked questions regarding the elections. So that is what happened.

Question Mr President, many nations seem to be calling for a stronger position against Zimbabwe today - do you believe your policy of quiet diplomacy is being challenged?

Answer I am not sure what is meant about "quiet diplomacy." I have asked this question, "what is loud diplomacy?" That is not diplomacy.

Really what I have said, take the situation now, the SADC Summit meets in Lusaka, takes certain decisions, for instance, that the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission needs to interact with the parties that have contested the elections with regard to the verification of the outstanding results which in fact is what the law says. Then they continued to say that we should continue in this role of Facilitator. Fine. What we need to do: we therefore have got to see the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission. We have got to see them and say to them, this is a decision that was arrived at at the SADC Summit - can we do something to ensure that that process of verification, that the parties also participate in this process of verification to ensure the results don't get cooked up by somebody. We have got to do that.

Now I am quite certain that it would be quite wrong for us to be shouting at the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission instead of going to see them. Now I don't know if going to see the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission is what is called "quiet diplomacy" but we have got to go and see them and say, can you put in place these processes so that the parties who contested the elections participate in the verification as the law of Zimbabwe says. We will do that. This is an example.

Whether there is a different way of engaging with the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission, I do not know, but I am quite certain that we cannot do it by issuing press statements: "we demand that the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission does the following." As the Facilitator we have got to go and see them and talk to them. Someone else may think they can produce the same result by issuing a press statement, sure. But I mean that as the Facilitator we do not have that kind of freedom.

Question Mr President, a shipment of weapons from China en-route to Zimbabwe has been found in a Durban harbour?

Answer Well, ask the Chinese Ambassador. Durban harbour handles goods for many countries on the continent. If you say there are weapons that have arrived from China in the Durban Harbour, I think you should ask the Chinese. There might be a consignment of coal that is being exported to the Congo or something, it is a port, those weapons would have had nothing to do with South Africa. I really don't know what Zimbabwe imports from China or what China imports from Zimbabwe.

Question Mr President, do you feel you can be objective about President Mugabe given his legendary status of a liberation hero?

Answer I have heard this story as well. I think that one thing that could happen is that people could credit us with the capacity to think. You know, I know, as much as you do, when something is wrong, I know it is wrong. The fact that I came from the liberation struggle does not mean I cannot recognise a wrong thing when it is wrong. It doesn't. So, this argument, because we all come from liberation movements, we mean that we will not recognise it because of some loyalty to ourselves. I'm saying that I think it would be good if people just credited us with a little bit of intelligence. I am saying we are perfectly capable of recognising when something is wrong.

The very fact that we have this mediation process on the political challenges begins from the premise that there is much that is wrong in Zimbabwe. Otherwise, why would we mediate something that is right? This does not make sense.

This argument that there is some loyalty in the region because we have all emerged from liberation struggles like the Zimbabweans implies that when something goes wrong in South Africa, Namibia or Zimbabwe we will not be able to see it because of this comradeship. I do not know where this comes from.

The very fact that you have a mediation process like this on the political challenges is because we recognise that there are things that have gone wrong.

The second part of the decision that SADC took is that many things have gone wrong with the economy. As a consequence of which, we decided that the finance ministers of the region needed to look at this to see what it is we can do to address this economy that has gone wrong. So, what more should we say in order to answer this view that we are blind to wrong things that may be done by a fellow liberation movement. The argument cannot be substantiated.

That is why we are intervening there - because of things that have gone wrong.