

Address of the President of South Africa, Thabo Mbeki, at the Youth Day celebrations

UWC, Cape Town, 16 June 2008

Chairperson and other Members of the National Youth Commission,
Our youth leadership,
Minister Essop Pahad and other Ministers and Deputy Ministers,
Premier of the Western Cape and MECs,
All public representatives,
The youth of our country,
Comrades and fellow South Africans:

I bring the greetings of our Government to everybody gathered here, as well as all our people throughout the country, especially the youth, who are also celebrating this important day in our national calendar.

As we celebrate this Youth Day, we must repeat the message that the nation expects the youth of today to follow in the footsteps of the 1976 youth and become agents of change, this time in the continuing struggle to achieve the goal of a better life for all our people.

We have the common responsibility always to recall the events of 1976 so that the bravery and sacrifices of that generation of young people should serve as an inspiration to the youth of today to work hard to contribute to the solution of the challenges they and our nation confront.

In 1976 the youth of our country correctly identified the challenges and tasks they had to confront. Today, 32 years later, once again our youth are faced with the obligation to identify the challenges and tasks they confront.

I am convinced that the young people of 2008 are as much Young Lions as were the youth of 1976, whom Oliver Tambo was inspired to describe as Young Lions.

The youth of 1976 earned this honoured title, the Young Lions, because of what they did to contribute to the liberation of the nation from apartheid and white minority rule.

The youth of 2008 must earn this honoured title, the Young Lions, because of what they do to rid the nation of the legacy of apartheid, and end the scourge of the poverty and underdevelopment which continue to imprison many of our fellow citizens, both young and old.

Whereas the youth of 1976 fought against inferior education as part of the struggle for freedom, today's youth should confront illiteracy and lack of skills as part of the struggle for development.

Whereas the youth of 1976 used stones and barricades against repressive forces, today's youth should use education and skills to fight poverty and unemployment.

Whereas the youth of 1976 used their energies to mobilise and campaign against apartheid, the youth of 2008 should use their talents to mobilise and campaign against crime and against drugs.

Whereas the youth of 1976 went into exile to train as soldiers of liberation, the youth of today should go to school, college and university to acquire skills that they would use for their advancement and the development of our country and continent.

As young people today, the Young Lions, we must join together to say that as young people we must not do crime. We must refuse to join criminal gangs. By respecting the law, we must ensure that we do not end up in jail.

As young people today, the Young Lions, we must join together to say that as young people we will not do drugs. If we have fallen victim to drug abuse, we must go to the rehabilitation centres to save our lives, because drugs kill!

As young people today, the Young Lions, we must join together to say that as young people we will not abuse alcohol.

As young people today, the Young Lions, we must join together to say that as young people we must pursue healthy life styles, including safe sex to protect ourselves from sexually transmitted infections and AIDS.

As young people today, the Young Lions, we must be at the forefront of the struggle to defeat violence against and the rape of women and children.

The good role models among us, the best Young Lions, must be those who get good results at all our educational institutions.

The good role models among us, the best Young Lions, must be those who work with the community, who help the poor, who volunteer to help improve their neighbourhoods, who give due respect to other members of the community, including the elderly and people with disabilities, and those who respect the values of Ubuntu and good moral conduct.

The Young Lions of 2008 must be both Proudly South African and Proudly African.

You as Young Lions must be ready always to defend the rights of all Africans wherever they are.

One of your immediate and principal responsibilities is to protect our fellow Africans who live in our country from the cowardly attacks by criminals, which we have seen here in Cape Town and other parts of our country in the last few weeks.

You know that thousands of our young people have served and continue to serve as peacekeepers as members of the South African National Defence Force, in the Democratic Republic of Congo, in Burundi, Sudan and African countries that have experienced brutal conflicts.

At the same time we must admit that all of us have been humiliated and shamed by the small number of young people who recently took it upon themselves to lead the criminal attacks against fellow Africans who live among us, and participated in looting their property.

You as today's Young Lions have a responsibility to educate all our youth to stop all attacks against our foreign guests, choosing, rather, to act as the first defenders of both our communities and our guests.

As we celebrate Youth Day, we salute those among the youth who are playing an important role, in the different sectors of our society, to contribute to the progressive transformation of our country and society.

Today we are free because in the past, young people made great sacrifices. This freedom has, in turn, brought about many opportunities. Accordingly, the youth should work in partnership with government to put to good use all the many and varied opportunities brought by democracy. This is necessary if we are to improve the social, political and economic conditions of young people.

Among other things, this means our Government and our society as a whole must do everything possible to ensure that all our young people have access to education and training, that we reduce youth unemployment and poverty, and that we instill pride and patriotism among all young people for being South African and African.

This means that as Government and society we should continue to prioritise the task to develop and empower the youth.

For a considerable period of time now, our youth formations have been involved in an important process to finalise the National Youth Policy which must inform the activities of both our Government and our society as a whole.

I am happy to announce that the process of consultation, led by the National Youth Commission, to elaborate the National Youth Policy, has been completed.

What now remains is for our Government to do its part to finalise the drafting of our National Youth Policy.

In this regard, I am also happy to announce that Government is determined to complete this process by the end of next month, July 31, 2008 and release our new National Youth Policy as soon as possible after this date.

On this important day on our national calendar, National Youth Day, on behalf of our Government, I would like to give our youth a number of undertakings.

Our Government recognises the fact that our youth are among the most vulnerable members of our society and will therefore continue to place youth development and empowerment at the centre of its programmes, including the Expanded Public Works Programme.

Our Government is fully sensitive to the challenge of youth unemployment and poverty. We will therefore continue to take all necessary and possible measures to empower our youth to acquire the knowledge and skills to achieve a decent standard of living, including within the context of the National Youth Service and the work of the Youth Development Forum. Our Government knows that many young people confront a daily problem of hunger and abject poverty. We will therefore continue to work to ensure the efficient functioning of the School Feeding Scheme, and the proper utilisation of the Child Support and Foster Grants.

Understanding the critical role of education and training to liberate our youth from unemployment and poverty, our Government will persist in its efforts to ensure that poor families do not have to pay school fees, that young people from poor families have access to the skills training provided by our FET Colleges, and that we devote even more resources to young people from poor families who are qualified to enter our Universities.

With regard to these and other challenges, I would like to use this opportunity to appeal to all youth formations and all our social partners, labour, business and civil society that we should join our hands and act together, addressing the critically important matter of youth development and empowerment as Business Unusual.

Together, through what we do practically, we must communicate the message to the youth of our country that we mean it when we say the future belongs to them. This must be a better future of hope and not a future of despair.

The ANC Government elected by our people in 1999, our country's Second Democratic Government, was inaugurated on June 16, National Youth Day, 1999.

We took the decision to inaugurate the then new Government on the Day of our Youth to make the firm statement that we understood this very well that our democracy has an absolute obligation to attend to the central challenge of the development and empowerment of the young people of our country, and thus to hand over to them a society that is better than the society we inherited in 1994.

Next year, in 2009, the masses of our people will choose our country's Fourth Democratically Elected Government.

To prepare for that important moment in our history, we must, together, on this National Youth Day, pledge that in the remaining months until the 2009 General Elections, we will:

- mobilise the youth of our country to focus on the task of development and nation building;
- inspire all youth formations to concentrate on the achievement of this objectives;
- ensure that Government accelerates its efforts to address the challenges facing the youth;
- improve the capacity of all Government structures, in all three spheres of Government, to respond to this task; and,
- thus prepare the conditions for our youth enthusiastically to participate in next year's democratic processes informed by the knowledge that their hopes rest in the democratic order for which the Young Lions of 1976 fought, ever ready even to lay downeir lives, as they did.

As I conclude, once more I would like to appeal to everybody that we should not drink and drive. We must not wander around on foot on our roads and highways having subjected our bodies to alcohol and drug abuse. We must arrive alive.

We must not attack one another in little but deadly conflicts driven by alcohol and drug abuse. We must not abuse this important holiday, or any other day, to abuse the women and children in our communities. We must act together to make our holidays and all other days happy days for all our people.

To honour their privileged place as the Young Lions, our youth must lead the offensive to achieve all these objectives.

I wish everyone, including the foreign guests who live among us, a happy and safe National Youth Day.

Thank you.