

WESTERN SAHARA: A PENDING DOSSIER. DECOLONISATION AND HUMAN RIGHTS. 50 YEARS OF UN GENERAL ASSEMBLY RESOLUTION 1514 (XV)

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I am delighted to be able to attend this gathering here today primarily because it is for a noble cause. I am humbled by the vast array of people from different spheres of life who have gathered to draw attention to a problem that has truly become the disgrace of our century.

We meet in a week when others are celebrating Africa Day, in a month when many African countries celebrate the Golden Jubilees of their independence and freedom from the yoke of Colonialism and in a year when South Africa itself has marked the 20th anniversary of the release of its leaders and the unbanning of its Liberation Movement. Western Sahara should be celebrating thirty-five years of independence. Yet here we are talking about decolonisation.

I do not think of Western Sahara as a country that was “colonised” by Morocco, I prefer to call it by what it is: theft, robbery, illegal occupation, annexation, invasion, etc, but I will stick with the terminology of the conference. I am, however, encouraged by the calibre of people that have gathered to address this scourge. I believe our presence will make a difference. Much of this conference will be dedicated to analysing the United Nations’ resolutions and various proposals and initiatives to get them on track. I regret I cannot afford that luxury. If I am not mistaken, no less than Ban Ki Moon, himself has admitted that the UN has failed Western Sahara and acknowledged that it is incapable of overcoming the obstacles put in place by Morocco. The international community, through the UN, has failed to fulfill its obligations to the Saharawi people. So has the African Union. I too bear that burden of guilt.

For many decades as we struggled for our own freedom in South Africa, Namibia, Mozambique and Zimbabwe we would hear our leaders pledge solidarity with other people of the globe, who were fighting for their liberation. I personally hung on to every word uttered by the late President of the African National Congress, Oliver Tambo, who never failed to single out the likes of FRETILIN of East Timor, Farabundo Marti of El Salvador, the PLO of Palestine and, of course, the Polisario Front of Western Sahara. But when we finally overthrew the Apartheid regime, in our excitement and eagerness to get on with building a new South Africa, we assumed, that with the last white minority regime gone that colonialism was over in Africa. How wrong we were. Fortunately, a decade later, another former President, Thabo Mbeki, began to rectify the situation by recognising SADR.

This conference takes place at a time when we all have five decades of

experience of dealing with the fight against colonialism. What is clear to see in our rear view mirror is that most African countries “began their freedom in chains”. When the former colonial masters “passed the baton” they ensured that the former colonies could not get off to a flying start. They tied one leg to the rock of economic dependency. South Africa was no exception. In the case of Western Sahara, Spain stole the land and effectively handed the baton to another coloniser and “tied both the political and economic legs” of the Saharawi people, effectively handicapping Western Sahara for generations to come. Morocco, on the other hand continues to enjoy, not only the support of Spain, but also that of most Western powers as they jointly rape the inhabitants and plunder the resources of these stolen territories. It is therefore very significant that this conference has been organised in Spain, by Spaniards.

The legacy of “one-legged freedom” in Africa that we see in our rear view mirror is not very flattering. It is true that Africa still has to find solutions to the economic legacy of slavery, colonialism and Apartheid aggression. It also has to find solutions to new political and economic conflicts that cannot be blamed on that legacy. Civil wars, conflict, poverty and corruption are all very real challenges. But before we consider those, we are morally obliged to remove the last vestiges of traditional colonialism, Apartheid style theft of land and economic slavery that still exist in Western Sahara, a country that has not been allowed the freedom to make its own choices.

This can happen and it must happen soon! It is in this light that I wish to share some of our experiences and thoughts with you on how we can bring the day of freedom for The People of the Sand just a little closer. I will illustrate our experience by talking about the “Four pillars” of our struggle. But before I do that I want to give you my perspective on a debate that was held yesterday. Yesterday we heard that the solution to the Saharawi issue was obvious, that it was self-determination or independence, based on implementation of legitimate resolutions and internationally recognised principles. The question that needs to be asked, though, is not about the desired outcome or the legitimacy of the struggle, but on the best way to get there and get there quickly. The desired outcome and legitimacy of the struggle have been obvious for thirty-five years.

To begin with we need, once again, to ask what the nature of this struggle is? This will help determine the correct method of achieving our desired outcome. Is it a struggle against colonialism? Is it, as was implied by some yesterday, a struggle for autonomy? Is it a struggle against an invader, an occupier and an oppressor? Is it a struggle for Human or Civil Rights as was that of African Americans in the 60’s?

It may be all of these, but most of all, in essence, it is a legitimate struggle for National Liberation, for a free and sovereign State, led by a legitimate National Liberation Movement and a legitimate Government. The fact that this Movement has been able to govern a small portion of its territory does not change the fundamental nature of the struggle. If we, and not our detractors, agree on this, then we can move on to selecting from a wide range of legitimate methods of struggle, that include both negotiated settlements and just wars, both in the occupied territories and in the occupiers backyard.

Let me now touch on the “Four Pillars of the Struggle” as they applied to our situation in South Africa. In Tindouf I said our struggle was based on four key pillars or main elements:

- Internal Political Mobilisation;
- Armed Struggle;
- Mass Mobilisation inside the Country; and
- International Solidarity.

I mentioned that in South Africa we had what we called a “Colonialism of a Special Type”, in which the coloniser and the colonised lived side by side. The same pertains to Palestine today and this is what Morocco is trying to achieve in Western Sahara. While there are numerous differences in the two situations, there are some uncanny similarities. This led me to suggest that Morocco must have taken lessons from the Apartheid and Zionist regimes.

We also experienced an attempt at so called autonomy. Several “Bantustans”, which were ethnically based, totally unviable, “independent” states, were created on 13% of the most unproductive parts of the country. They were led by puppet dictators. The people rejected these “countries” outright despite some having been given official recognition by certain Western and African countries.

I do not need to educate any of you on Political Mobilisation or on Armed Struggle. Briefly, though, it was very important that we kept our own cadres inside the Country and outside in the Camps fully briefed and fully involved in developing our political strategies. We did this in many ways; for example, as I said earlier, I enjoyed listening to Oliver Tambo as he broadcast on Radio Freedom from Addis Ababa, Dar es Salaam and elsewhere. Political education was an ongoing process for all cadres, no matter how senior, and it still is.

Perhaps the only comment I can make about armed struggle is that we did not agree to abandon this tactic until we felt that the process of creating a free and democratic country was irreversible. We quite often used military strikes simply to instill a sense of confidence in our people and a sense of unease in the oppressor population. It was clear that no side could win a war outright, but the fact that we could reach the enemy anywhere, anytime and in different ways was very unsettling.

Moving on to Internal Mass Mobilisation, I would like to quote from my dear Brother and Comrade in arms Oliver Tambo once again. In a statement entitled “Move from condemnation to confrontation of Apartheid and Colonialism” to a conference in Oslo on April 11, 1973 he said:

“It is insufficient to embark on external pressures if there is a weakness in internal pressures. Indeed, the effort of the world’s solidarity movement can go largely wasted if they do not complement and if they are not based on strong internal action. If the internal action is weak, it needs to be strengthened”.

In South Africa this led to a broad spectrum of organisations from different Political Organisations, Labour, Civil Society, NGOs, Media, Churches and even members of the oppressor group coming together in a Mass Democratic Movement (MDM) that took the struggle to the streets on a daily basis. South Africa achieved what is today called the “CNN effect” not a day went

by without that country being in the news, without some influential person joining us in protest, without some blow being struck against the enemy internally.

I frequently and deliberately exposed myself to arrest on a daily basis. I did so to highlight the plight of our political prisoners, and in particular, to shine a spotlight on our leaders on Robben Island. I feared the worst from the brutal prison authorities.

What political mobilisation means for Western Sahara needs to be debated. The elements that make up the political situation here bears so many resemblances to ours that I will simply read a list of some of them: arrest, detention without trial, torture, hunger strikes, violence, harrasment, exile, banishment, isolation, restriction of association and assembly, banning of political parties and activity, military collusion, cross border raids, theft of natural resources, repression and death. I could continue but I am sure no one doubts that Morocco has the same fascist tendencies that Apartheid South Africa had. The objective of such blatant disregard for law and human rights is there for all to see: Morocco is exploiting the territory economically, with the connivance of France, USA, Spain and others. For example, the revenues of \$ five billion dollars that the occupying power extracts from exploiting Saharawi rock phosphate and the fish industry annually, go solely to the Moroccan regime. They use this revenue to buy more weapons and to reinforce the presence of more than one hundred and thirty thousand troops stationed in the occupied territories and to support the needs of more than three hundred thousand Moroccan settlers. They live in luxury while the Saharawi are condemned to conditions akin to slavery.

Both the occupied and liberated territories have not been given the opportunity to develop social and economic infrastructure, as other former colonies were. Unemployment exceeds 35%. The legacy of three decades of aggression, conflict and blatant exploitation will not be easy to overcome. Once again, to illustrate our stand on International Mobilisation, I would like to quote from Oliver Tambo, who said in 1973:

“... / should like to say that in discussing political and diplomatic action against apartheid... we should press for a shift in emphasis from what has been world condemnation... to world confrontation. We have been condemning now at least for over a decade, with little results. It is difficult to think of any system that has been described with stronger terms of condemnation than the policies and practices of... the South African regime. What I think has been missing is how to confront them effectively at the international level”.

The international community needs to confront those countries that are violating international law and human rights by collaborating with Morocco. More importantly, the international community needs to confront Morocco directly. The question is how to mobilise support against such a strong oppressor? How to spark global interest in the plight of Western Sahara? I will come to the role that Universities can play in this process in a while, but the answer is different for each country. Economic Sanctions and a Sports and Cultural Boycott worked very well for us. (One group of European anti-Apartheid activists was so incensed by the collaboration of one of their oil companies with Apartheid that they started burning its filling stations right

here on the Continent!)

I believe it is the same vocal action that swept Apartheid away that is required to free Western Sahara. In my view we need to highlight the atrocities of the occupiers and “name, blame and shame” those that support them constantly. What is clear is that it was not until the world decided to end its silent collaboration with Apartheid that we were able to eradicate Apartheid.

Western Sahara has indeed become a chessboard upon which the geopolitical struggles of various entities are played out. The prize for the victor is the free exploitation of Western Sahara’s resources. That is why numerous conservative, right wing and reactionary think tanks and lobby groups have taken a keen interest in pushing Morocco’s case, gaining victories for Morocco and reversing the achievement of decades of progressive thought and action. The likes of the so called “International Crisis Group”, the French who blocked the inclusion of the human rights dimension in a UN resolution and the US Senators who wrote to Obama urging him to support Morocco are some recent examples that emphasise the need for us to up our own game.

What is interesting about the current situation in Western Sahara is that Morocco and its allies claim to be developing the occupied territories and want to be rewarded for such. I will quote an African American activist to highlight the flaw in this argument. Malcolm X said:

“You don’t stick a knife 9 inches into a man’s back and then pull it out 3 inches and say we are making progress!”

It is not Morocco that should be rewarded, but it is the Saharawi people that need to be compensated for the repression, indignity and economic prejudice that we have suffered as a result of thirty-five years of delayed sovereignty and thirty-five years of aggression and thirty-five years of economic exploitation! It is impossible to quantify the cost of the lives lost since 1975 and the damage caused to lives of people by the degradation and isolation of exile camps and the despair of living in territories under siege. Never-the-less the question of reparations by Morocco and its cronies and of an international assistance package to Western Sahara needs to be added to the debate on any negotiated settlement.

The less I say about comments made yesterday about the ability of the Saharawi to govern themselves and the “small size of the population” the better.

There is another principle that was raised by Tambo in 1973. He said: “Conference should underscore the fact that all assistance to the victims of colonialism and apartheid whether humanitarian or otherwise should be towards the one single purpose of promoting the success of the liberation struggle, the defeat of colonialism and apartheid, the liberation of the people from these evils”.

This principle will remain important even for a Liberated Western Sahara. In addition to this assistance we want to use our own abundant resources to improve our own social condition. We want to be free to develop and trade our own resources and not to forever be recipients of Aid. We want to address the security, health, education and wellbeing of our people, to provide jobs, clean water, sanitation, food and nutrition security in our own Country, and not in exile. We want to strengthen the governance of our land

and extend it to every inch of the Country. We want to be free to associate with those countries that are interested in the prosperity of our people and our neighbours in the Maghreb region. The next generation must live in a normal society! I hope that our experience with the “four pillars” will prove to be of some relevance to you.

In conclusion, I would like to talk about ways in which Universities can assist us in this process. The role played by Universities, in particular in the United States, in the Anti-Apartheid Solidarity Movement was instrumental in catalysing the end of Apartheid. Universities were the first to put pressure on their Fund Managers to divest their funds from companies that did business with the apartheid regime. This was the beginning of sanctions.

Many Universities convened colloquiums and conferences like this one. These helped us develop cogent arguments, make rational plans and set attainable targets. These conferences laid the basis for the theoretical framework of our struggle. But they did not stop there, it was the Universities across the globe that instigated and led marches and protests that grew from a swell into a tidal wave that forced the global corporate world and European and the US Governments to take decisive action against apartheid.

As Universities you need to make it uncomfortable for your governments to continue with “business as usual” with Morocco. And yes, you must continue to identify areas where you can co-operate and assist with the improvement of the social condition of the Saharawi refugee camps. Anything that relieves the daily suffering of our people is welcome. But don’t forget what Oliver Tambo said that “all assistance to the victims of colonialism whether humanitarian or otherwise should be towards the one single purpose of promoting the success of the liberation struggle, the defeat of colonialism”.

And so it is with a sense of pride that I conclude this address to you. I am proud that you have taken this stand to dedicate the VI (sixth) Conference of the Madrid Public Universities to mobilize effort for the last push against colonialism in Africa. Conferences alone will not free Western Sahara, but this one will help us develop a clearer and more coherent position of support for the decolonisation of Western Sahara. But the success of this, and other events like it, will depend on our own actions over the next few months (I did not say years I cannot wait that long).

There is a song that we sang during the struggle that went:

“Kobanjani sesihlezi no Tambo

Kobanjani sesimtshela ngama Bhun’eginxika?”

What will it be like when we sit with Tambo? What will it be like when we tell him of the surrender of the Boers? Well he did not make it to 1994, to see the Free and Democratic South Africa that he fought for. So Nelson Mandela has promised to tell him all about it when they finally meet up there! I wish to record that it is my intention to brief him about the total liberation of the Saharawi People, about the final victory of the Polisario Front. I wish to describe it in great detail, so please get on with it.

I thank you.