Tribute at the Funeral Service of Walter Sisulu

17 May 2003

In the last few years we have walked this road with greater frequency, marching in the procession to bid farewell to the veterans of our movement, paying our last respects to the fallen spears of the nation from a generation now reaching the end of a long and heroic struggle.

Those of us from that generation, who are singled out to stay the longest, have to bare the pain of seeing our comrades go.

We shared tears over them because we have walked such a long road together: sharing trials and tribulations; danger, anguish and fear; and also precious moments of joy, gladness and laughter. Their going must leave an emptiness with those of us who stay behind.

Our sadness over them is tempered by the comforting knowledge that the separation will now not be interminably long. And more importantly, by the sure knowledge that their lives were not wasted and spent fruitlessly. They fought a noble battle and lived their lives in pursuit of a better life for all who follow. The democracy in which we bury them and honour them, is the sweet fruit of their lives of struggle and sacrifice.

Today we stand at the grave of one of the greatest amongst that generation of great freedom fighters.

We take leave of a man of whom I have already said in these sad days since his death, that from the moment when we first met he has been my friend, my brother, my keeper, my comrade.

Our paths first crossed in 1941. During all of these years since, our lives have been intertwined. We shared the joy of living, and the pain. Together we shared ideas, forged common commitments. We walked side by side through the valley of death, nursing each other's bruises, holding each other up when our steps faltered. And together we were privileged to savour the taste of freedom.

We shall not weep for Xhamela. He would not expect us to or approve of us doing so. We do, though, deeply mourn his death. A part of us is gone with his passing.

We have so often made this point while Xhamela was still alive and since his passing away, but it needs repeating well into the future. He neither sought nor wielded his authority by virtue of office. He was ever ready to draw others into leadership. And he never ask of others what he was not prepared to do himself.

Rivalry between organisations was to be expected in prison. Many among us prisoners were perceived to be leaders of one or other organisation. But all prisoners saw Xhamela as the leader of all of us, irrespective of the organisation one belonged to - a leader of the entire people.

His greatness as a leader derived from his humility and his ingrained belief in and respect for collective leadership. He knew and taught us that wisdom comes from sharing insights and listening to and learning from each other. He was always the unifier, never a divider where others of us would speak a hasty word or act in anger, he was the patient one, seeking to heal and bring together.

And how can we speak about this great unifier of people without recognising and honouring that great unity in his own life: that of Walter and Albertina as a marital couple, a unity of such deep friendship and mutual respect, a personal and political partnership that transcended and survived all hardships, separations and persecution.

And if our nation has to take an example for its own future together, where better than to look to the family that Walter and Albertina nurtured, held together and led? That family speaks to us of how quality and greatness are borne out of suffering and adversity.

We console Albertina and the children by paying tribute to what they have come to represent in our national life.

The spear of the nation has fallen, as the militant youth of our country once sang during funerals. Let us pick up the spear, now to build a country after the example that Walter Sisulu has set for us.

Hamba Kahle, Xhamela. Qhawe la ma Qhawe.

Source: www.anc.org.co.za