

[Speech delivered by Commander-in-chief Fidel Castro at the south African Parliament. Capetown, South Africa. September 4, 1998 \[1\]](#)

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Honorable Mrs. Frene Ginwala, President of the National Assembly;

Honorable Mr. Lekota, President of the National Council of Provinces;

Honorable Members of the South African Parliament;

Distinguished Guests:

While flying to South Africa, I was informed that this address should be written, given the need for its translation and distribution among the guests who would not have access to simultaneous translation. I tried to imagine what my impression would be on arriving to this Parliament, and what could I say that would be worthy of the interest and attention of those who so graciously have come to listen to my words.

What I have prepared, with the aid of some data, is therefore, only the fruit of my imagination, like a love letter to a sweetheart written thousands of miles away, without knowing how she thinks or what she wants to hear and without even knowing what her face looks like (Applause).

I consider that a speech is an intimate and frank conversation. I have become accustomed to simply talk and dialogue with my interlocutors while looking at their faces, trying to persuade them of what I say (Laughs and applause).

If at some point, I drift away from this text to add things, as new ideas occur to me, I hope that those who do not have earphones will forgive me, that the organizers and persons in charge of ensuring the efficiency and solemnity of this act will understand (Applause).

As you can see, everything is different. There aren't earphones for anyone, so there will be a direct translation (Pointing to the translator). I will have to read paragraph by paragraph, idea by idea. Interruptions will be minimal. This proves once again that one cannot despair in the face of difficulties, that there is a solution for everything (Laughs and applause).

As I think about this country and its history, all sorts of events run through my mind, facts, data, realities which reflect the enormous responsibility and colossal and historical task of creating the new South Africa you propose for yourselves.

I hope that my presence here will leave, as a sole and fundamental remembrance, the fervent and sincere wish to support your enormous efforts aimed at healing the deep wounds that have for centuries been opened.

This promising country, which yesterday was subjected to isolation and universal condemnation,

tomorrow may be an example of brotherhood and justice. The timely presence, at the precise moment, of a leader of exceptional humane and political conditions make it possible. This man, kept in the somber corners of a prison, was more than a political prisoner serving a life sentence; he was a prophet of politics (Applause), who enjoys today the appreciation of even those who once hated and punished him without mercy (Applause).

Nelson Mandela will not go down in history for the 27 consecutive years he spent in prison, without ever forsaking his ideals (Applause); he will be remembered because he was capable of stripping from his heart all the venom that such unjust punishment can accumulate (Exclamations of: "Yes!" and applause); for his generosity and the wisdom he showed in brilliantly leading his self-sacrificing and heroic people when the hour of victory could no longer be contained, deeply convinced that South Africa could not be built on hatred and revenge (Applause).

Today there are still two South Africas, which I should not refer to as white and black, those terms should be forever banished if a multi-racial and united country is to be built (Applause). I rather put it another way: two South Africas, one rich and one poor (Applause), one and the other; one where an average family receives two times the income of the other; one in which 13 out of every 1 000 children die before reaching their first year of life; another in which the number of children who die is 57; one in which life expectancy is 73 years, another where it is only 56 years; one in which 100% of the people can read and write; another where the illiteracy rate is over 50%; one in which there is broad, almost full employment; another in which 45% of the people are unemployed; one in which 12% of the population owns almost 90% of the land; another where almost 80% of its inhabitants own less than 10% (Exclamations of: "Yes!" and applause); one which accumulated and possesses almost all of the technical and administrative know how; another which was condemned to inexperience and ignorance; one that enjoys well being and freedom; the other which has only conquered freedom without well being (Applause).

It is not possible to change this terrible heritage overnight (Applause). You gain nothing whatsoever by disorganizing the productive apparatus or by not taking advantage of the considerable material and technical wealth and the productive efficiency created by the noble hands of the workers under a cruel and unjust, virtually a slavery system. The undertaking of social changes in an ordered, gradual and peaceful manner so that this wealth may bring to the South African people maximum benefits, is perhaps one of the most difficult tasks that human society can ever achieve (Applause). It is, in the view of this daring visitor whom you have invited here to say a few words, the greatest challenge that South Africa is facing today (Exclamations of "Yes!").

I reject demagoguery. I would never utter a word to incite discontent, let alone to win applause or please the ears of millions of South Africans who are rightly hurting because the paradise of equal opportunities and justice for all, a dream of so many years of struggle, has not yet been attained in their country (Exclamations of "Yes!").

There are many nations with similar economic and social problems resulting from the conquest, the colonization and the unbearable disparities in the distribution of wealth; but no where else did the struggle for the respect of human dignity awaken so much hope. The contradiction between hopes, possibilities and priorities is not only a matter of South Africa's domestic affairs; it is the object of debate, and it will for long continue to be debated, by honest scholars in many countries.

The system of conquest, colonization, slavery, extermination of the indigenous populations and the plundering of their natural resources during the last centuries, left terrible sequels in the overwhelming majority of the countries of Asia, Africa and Latin America (Applause).

Seventy million natives were exterminated in the American Hemisphere through ruthless exploitation, slave work, imported diseases or by the sword of the conquistadors.

Twelve million Africans were torn from their villages and homes and taken in chains to a new continent

to work as slaves on the plantations, without counting the millions who drowned or perished during the voyage.

Actually, apartheid was universal and lasted centuries (Applause). In our hemisphere, the slaves were the first to revolt, in one way or another, against colonial domination as early as the 16th century. Large uprisings in Jamaica, Barbados occurred during the early 18th century, long before the rebellion of the North American colonies at the end of that century. The first republic in Latin America was established by the slaves in Haiti. In Cuba, years later, heroic and massive slave revolts occurred. The slaves of African origin pointed out the way to freedom in that continent.

Many of the crimes in history weigh heavily on the conscious of the civilized and Christian West, as they like to qualify themselves (Prolonged applause). Not only those who in South Africa conceived and applied the apartheid system, have to shoulder all the burden of guilt.

The political miracle of unity, reconciliation and peace, under the guidance of Nelson Mandela, may eventually become an unprecedented example in History (Applause).

Recalling in part the meaning of a famous phrase, one can say that never before did so many wish so much for such a few. You, South African citizens and leaders of all parties, from all ethnic origin, are the few to whom we wish so much and from which all the inhabitants of this planet expect so much from the political and humane point of view.

One idea can lead to another: from the new South Africa, the hope for a new Africa (Applause). South Africa, from the economic, industrial, agricultural, technological and scientific point of view, is the most developed country on the African continent. Its mineral and energetic wealth is countless and, in many cases, the first in the world. Today, South Africa generates 50% of the electricity of the continent, 85% of the steel and 97% of the coal. It transports 69% of all of the railway freight, owns 32% of all the motor vehicles and 45% of the paved roads. The rest of Africa is also immensely rich in natural resources. Those who have had the privilege of struggling side by side with them, either fighting for freedom or in peaceful construction, are very much aware of the enormous potential and untapped talent of its sons and daughters, their extraordinary valor and intelligence, their capacity to assimilate the most complex scientific and technical know-how (Prolonged applause).

Cuba is a small island located next to a very powerful neighbor. Notwithstanding, the educational centers in our country have already graduated 26 294 African professionals and technicians (Applause), and other 5 850 have been trained there. Furthermore, 80 524 Cuban civilian cooperators - including 24 714 doctors, dentists, nurses and health-care technicians, as well as tens of thousands professors, teachers, engineers, and other professionals and skilled workers - have rendered internationalist services in Africa (Applause). For over thirty years, 381 432 Cuban soldiers and officers have been on duty-service or have fought hand-in-hand with African soldiers and officers in this continent for national independence or against foreign aggression. (Prolonged applause). The total number is 461 956 in a short historical period. From these African soils, where they worked and fought voluntarily and selflessly, they have only taken back home to Cuba the remains of their fallen comrades and the honor of a duty accomplished (Applause). That's how we know so well and appreciate the human qualities of the sons of Africa; much better than those who colonized and exploited this continent for centuries (Applause).

Today, we witness with profound and heart-trending pain its fratricidal wars, economic underdevelopment, poverty, famine, lack of hospitals and schools, and poor communications. We are shocked to see that Manhattan or Tokyo have more telephones than the entire Africa.

Its deserts are growing, its forests are disappearing, and its soils are eroding. And something dreadful: old and new diseases, such as malaria, tuberculosis, leprosy, cholera, ebola, parasites, and curable communicable ailments are decimating its people. Its infant mortality rate is hitting record highs as compared to the rest of the world, as is also the case of the mothers who die during labor. In some of its

countries, life expectancy is beginning to decline.

The terrible HIV is spreading geometrically. It is not an overstatement and you know it; entire African nations are threatened to perish. Each infected person would need to spend \$10 000 each year in drugs only for survival, while health-care budgets can barely appropriate \$10.00 per capita. At current prices, it would be required to spend \$250 billion in Africa every year only to combat AIDS. Hence, Africa reports 9 in ten persons killed by AIDS in the planet.

Can the world be heedless of this disaster? Isn't Man capable of addressing this situation with his astonishing scientific advances? What's the point of talking about macro-economic indicators and other eternal fallacies; recipes and more recipes from the International Monetary Fund and the World Trade Organization, or the miraculous strengths of the blind market laws and the wonders of neo-liberal globalization? (Applause) Why aren't these realities recognized? Why aren't alternative formulas being pursued, and is recognized that Man can organize his life and destiny in a more rational and humane fashion? (Applause)

A deep and unavoidable economic crisis - perhaps the worst ever - is threatening us all. In this world turned into a casino, \$1.5 trillion-worth speculative transactions unrelated to the actual economy are made every day (Shouts of "Yes!" and applause). Never before in the economic history of the world had such a phenomenon occurred.

The stocks prices in the US stock markets have multiplied to absurdity. Only a historic privilege associated with a number of factors made it possible for a rich nation to become the world authority issuing the reserve currency kept by the central banks of every country. Its Treasury bonds are the ultimate shelter for any investors frightened by a financial crisis. The dollar lost its backup in gold when that country unilaterally repealed the conversion established in Bretton Woods. As was long dreamed by the alchemists of the Middle Ages, the notes were converted to gold, and the value of the world's reserve currency has been, ever since, a simple matter of trust. Wars, such as that of Vietnam, at a cost of \$500 billion, gave rise to this enormous deceit. This was compounded by a colossal military build-up without taxes that raised the US public debt from \$700 billion to \$2.5 trillion in just eight years.

Money has become a fiction, and securities have no actual or material support any more. In recent years, American investors have acquired \$9 trillion through a simple mechanism of galloping multiplication of share prices in their stock markets. As a result, their transnational corporations have made huge investments both overseas and at home, while domestic consumption has risen excessively, thus artificially nurturing an economy that has seemed to grow steadily, free of inflation and crises. Sooner or later, the world would have to pay the price.

The most thriving nations in South East Asia have been bankrupted. The world's second largest economy, Japan, can no longer stem its downturn, the strength of its yen tumbling. The yuan has upheld its rate by dint of a sacrifice being made by China, whose high growth rate will drop this year below 8%, a number dangerously close to the limit of tolerance for a country engaged in a fast radical reform and an extraordinary labor downsizing in its production enterprises. Re-enter the Asian crisis, and an economic disaster hits Russia where the greatest economic and social failure ever has been the result of an attempt to build capitalism there (Applause), in spite of immense economic assistance, recommendations and prescriptions given by the best Western minds (Laughter). And this is also the time of the greatest political risk arising from the situation created in a State that holds thousands of nuclear warheads and where the operators of strategic missiles have not seen their paychecks in five months (Laughter and applause).

Stock markets in Latin America have, over the last few months, lost over 40% of their share value, and in Russia, 75%. This phenomenon is becoming widespread. Commodities such as copper, nickel, aluminum, crude oil and many others have seen their prices slashed by 50% in a large number of countries.

The US stock markets are already shaking. As you are aware, they have just experienced a black Monday. I don't know why they call it black (Applause); in fact, it has been a white Monday (Applause). When and how panic will break out is unclear. Can anyone be certain at this stage that a collapse like the 1929 crash will not repeat itself? Neither Rubin, nor Greenspan, nor Camdessus nor anyone else could. Uncertainty is haunting everyone, including the most outstanding economic analysts. Only that there is a huge difference between now and then. In 1929, the speculative operations did not account for 1.5 trillion dollars, and barely 3% of the Americans owned shares traded in the stock markets. Today, 50% of the US population has invested its savings and retirement funds in shares of these stock markets. I have not devised this, it is no fantasy, read the news. Add to this, if you will, the fact that the new world order is destroying more than ever the Nature that supports the 6 billion people we are today, and that will be required to support the 10 billion people we will be in 50 years from now.

Up to here I have done my job. I have just said to you what has crossed my mind while I was at 10 000 meters altitude (Laughter and applause). Don't you ask me about solutions; I am not a prophet. I only know that the greatest crises have always given rise to the greatest solutions (Applause).

I trust in the intelligence of peoples and men. I trust in the need for humanity to survive. I trust that you, distinguished and patient members of this Parliament, will reflect upon this issue. I trust you will understand that this is not a matter of ideologies, races, colors, personal income or social classes; it is a matter of life or death for us all who sail in the same boat (Applause).

Therefore, let us be more generous, more fraternal, more humane. Let South Africa become a role model for a more just and humane world of the future (Applause). If you can make it, all of us can (Applause and acclamations of "Fidel, Fidel, Fidel").

Thank you (Ovation).

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