

## **2018 Nelson Mandela Day**

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It is known all over the world that today, July 18, 2018, is Nelson Mandela international day. The UN General Assembly had in November 2009 passed a resolution recognizing Madiba's birthday as an international event. It was not meant to be a holiday though. In addition, today marks the centenary of the birth of the icon.

In Lagos, Nigeria, we had the celebration under the auspices of the United Nations Association of Nigeria with support from the UN Information Centre led by Ronald Kayanja as well as the South African Consulate in Lagos since the Embassy is in Abuja, Nigeria's capital. I understand from my eldest daughter that the UN in Cote d'Ivoire organized the planting of a thousand trees. Madiba would have loved that.

We had a beautiful time at Freedom Park. Freedom Park became the new name for the premises that was once the first prison built by the British in Nigeria. We did not have prisons before the British built His Majesty's Prison on Broad Street, Lagos. It was meant to hold 20 initially but had over 11 times that number by the time it went into disuse. In its heydays, this prison provided the pain of loss of freedom to criminals and those who dared to ask for freedom from the control of the British. It had housed Herbert Macaulay, Nnamdi Azikiwe, Anthony Enahoro, foremost labour leader - Michael Imodu and many more. Even in the post-colonial period, Obafemi Awolowo and Lateef Jakande were incarcerated there. Like Mandela, the latter two had, with others, faced the controversial treason trials.

In effect, now a place of culture, it was the appropriate place to celebrate the legacy Nelson Mandela left us.

The day started with the 67 minutes of community service marking the 67 years Mandela devoted to the struggle for liberation. Post the cleaning, we gathered for a dialogue Chaired by General Ishola Williams, a man dedicated to integrity that earned him the fact of being the poorest General from the Nigerian Armed Forces.

We listened to a recorded short video message from Antonio Guterres, the UN Secretary-General. It is no longer like the good old days when there would be a search for the most senior UN staff member to read what international bureaucrats would have written. He spoke to us about the virtues of the man - Mandela - that endeared him to humanity.

The opening remarks of Major-General Williams (rtd), who had also served the UN in NY was vintage. He reviewed highlights of Mandela's contribution towards the on-going goal of freeing humanity from racial discrimination. He went further to remind the audience of Nigeria's contribution towards anti-apartheid.

Indeed, though not sharing a border, Nigeria was regarded as a frontline state in the war against apartheid. Not only did the Nigerian government play a part, Labour Unions and Students played a major role. I was a student leader for part of this period and still remember vividly financial contributions that we raised and lectures to pressure our government to accept our desire, as students, to actually join the fight on the dignity of the black man etc.

General Williams decried the Xenophobia against other Africans and especially Nigerians in South Africa and called for calibrated efforts to use history, art and civil society to cement stronger relations between Nigeria and South Africa. The South African brother from the Consulate tried to assure there was no government policy against Nigerians. Though that may be true, it is no relief to see videos of Nigerians being attacked as the police failed to respond.

A younger man - Moses Omoghena, was to give a poem but actually gave a poetic speech on what it would have been like if he had met Mandela but how he has reconciled himself with Madiba's legacy as an alternative to actually meeting.

A short play titled: "The Mandela in Me" was acted by some secondary school girls who called on all to imbibe Mandela's virtues and embark on transformative change.

I had the singular honour of delivering the centenary Keynote Address that went on for 40 minutes instead of the 20 minutes that I was advised. I had titled my presentation as: "Leadership for Freedom of a Rainbow". I started by assuring Moses Omoghena that meeting Mandela, as I did, could be an over-awing experience in spite of his humility and simplicity. I first met him in the men's room of his office then at Shell House - before he became the first post-apartheid President of South Africa.

I used the many quotes from Mandela to explore his position on selfless leadership in the quest for many aspects of freedom that resulted in the right to vote and constitutional prohibition of racism, sexism and discrimination against the LGBTQ.

I noted Madiba's inability to address the inequities in income and land distribution, meaning that he did not achieve economic freedom for South Africa. In effect, he made the same error as Kwame Nkrumah who had asked us to seek the political kingdom first and all else would be added. Economic emancipation is yet to be added to Africans since the flag independence. I provided an Economist magazine's infographics that showed that the lots of the majority of Black Africans did not change from the time Mandela was born through to his death.

Nonetheless, I expressed the wish that Nigeria could have a none thieving leader that focuses on providing selfless leadership for our entire country. For sure, Nigeria is per capita worse than South Africa in many respects, including on the Human Development Index.

I suggested that Mandela's use of the minimal corruption (compared to Nigeria), in South Africa in one of his speeches, to refer to his country as a sick society to conclude that Nigeria must be described as an insane country given our complacency towards corruption. Our pretentious leadership no longer cover their tracks. They are in all sorts of scandals, including Panama and Paradise papers and even boast on the pages of newspapers on who stole more than the other. Yet, we do very little, if at all, to seek accountability. The South Koreans, Icelanders etc reacted but we just kept silent. It is noteworthy that popular pressure did not allow the sweeping under the carpet of the allegations against former President Jacob Zuma in South Africa. We are yet to bring anyone substantial to book or address the scourge of corruption with the seriousness it deserves in Nigeria.

I made Mandela speak to the audience through me on qualities of leadership that he espoused over time. I dwelt on his justifying Malcom X's, "By Any Means Necessary". When apartheid regime met non-violent protests with the full force of the armed forces, he joined the others to form an armed wing of the ANC.

At the Amphitheatre, immediately after the formal ceremony, Squad One - a Lagos based team provided fantastic percussion on African drums. The dexterity with which the young women handled huge African drums was something Madiba would have been proud of. Indeed, Madiba's centenary anniversary was a great successful event in Lagos.