



High-Level Segment Statement by the South African Deputy Minister of Home Affairs, Ms Fatima Chohan, on the occasion of the 65th Session of the Executive Committee of the UNHCR

Geneva, 29 September 2014

Chairperson,
High Commissioner Antonio Guterres,
Excellencies,
Distinguished delegates,

Twenty - year old democratic South Africa extends its appreciation to the UNHCR and the High Commissioner for its continued humanitarian efforts for Refugees around the globe, and for hosting this High Level segment under the theme “Enhancing International Co-operation, Solidarity, Local Capacities and Humanitarian Action for Refugees in Africa”. In this regard we align ourselves fully with the African Group’s statement delivered by the distinguished Minister of Home Affairs of Namibia. This High Level Segment affords all of us the opportunity to address your call for prevention of refugee producing conflicts, to take stock of the issues and challenges that impede our collective efforts towards a peaceful and caring world.

The UNHCR has its origins in the wake of the end of the Second World War. Upon its formation in 1950 the UNHCR was established with a three year mandate to solve the displacement of victims of redrawn boundaries on the European continent. Sixty four years later the world is confronted with more refugees than ever before. Constructive ways to resolve conflict seems to have eluded us. This state of affairs requires each of us to reflect differently on the root causes of refugee situations, particularly in Africa.

Your Excellencies

It is the first time that South Africa is addressing the Executive Committee of the UNHCR since the passing last December of our founding President and greatest son of our soil Nelson Rohlilala Mandela. It may be apt, Excellencies for us to take a moment and reflect on the legacy of Madiba and the liberation struggle in South

Africa. This struggle by a diverse congress movement which produced leaders of the calibre of Oliver Tambo, Walter Sisulu, Yusuf Dadoo, Lillian Ngoyi, Braam Fischer and many others, was not a struggle based in ethnicity or racial superiority. It had as its noble goal the simple idea that EVERYONE MATTERS.

It would have been much simpler certainly to have a vanquished white minority in the aftermath of Apartheid, but these were not ordinary leaders, these were dreamers with a noble vision that inspired millions -simply because they taught us this truth that Everyone Matters. This was no ordinary struggle it was a struggle of all for all of the peoples of SA, including our white compatriots who the liberation struggle regarded as victims of their own oppression who required to be liberated from their own prejudices because they too, mattered.

Excellencies,

All nations and tribes on this planet are enormously accomplished – each has much to be proud of in their languages, their traditions and values, their artistic and other achievements. In each musical note, in the grace and rhythm of our unique dances, each component of humanity celebrates its unique sense of being and life itself. Our diverse cuisine, rituals and festivals, all together compose the fascinating tapestry of human life in all of its beauty. Each one matters.

No religion teaches evil; indeed a love of humanity and a striving for universal brotherhood is the common thread in all faiths as they acknowledge a single Creator in whose image it said mankind has been created. To the Creator - EVERYONE MATTERS.

Economies around the globe are challenged by previous excesses and goodwill around the planet is in short supply. Countries need security and children need hope, you have told us High Commissioner - instead wars and violent insurrection has become a standard feature of our endeavors to manage diversity and our relations as nations.

An essential commodity in any war is an enemy whether real or contrived. In this modern age we have used the amazing advances in communications not to break down barriers but to construct them. The construction of the “other” is a convenient image that has served war mongers throughout the ages.

In this 21st century when nations are sending space craft to Mars with the intention of one day growing our world beyond our earthly bounds, it is apt that we should reflect on our collective legacy as a species, not just as separate nations and groupings.

Science tells us that we are all products of migrants from the African continent, the Mother continent. It is ironic that today African Migrants find doors shut to them. Have we since our emigration out of the African continent at the earliest hour of our creation done ourselves proud as a species and not simply as individual nations, groups and tribes? Have we learned the fundamental lesson inherent in our very

existence that EVERYONE MATTERS? Or have we merely become more sophisticated at raising the spectre of the “other”?

It is at forums of the United Nations where nations are bound together as the brothers and sisters we actually are, a single species whose dominion over our world is unprecedented - that these types of questions have to seize us. I humbly submit that we are not seized with these questions often enough, Mr Chairman. If indeed we are agreed on that simple but essential principle that EVERYONE MATTERS, then everything else falls to be insignificant. Humanity will finally have evolved to its true calling and we will then be able to take delight in the diversity amongst us. It is then that we will truly be able to celebrate, and not merely tolerate each other. If we truly understand that Everyone Matters, then Madiba would have taught us well.

Conquest and subjugation will be the practice of deviants and not the mainstream of political thought. The equitable sharing of resources and collective sharing of burdens can be the only way forward for our species if indeed we act on the basic principle that EVERYONE MATTERS. No language will be subdued no religion will be persecuted and no people subjugated because EVERYONE MATTERS.

It was Madiba and other leaders of our struggle who taught us that “the other” is but a mirror of ourselves under different material circumstances. They knew, that in the aftermath of wars the vanquished rise again in vengeance and more hate is spawned, because it is a state of nature that EVERYONE MATTERS. Small wars beget greater wars as the European continent has learnt after successive world wars at the turn of 20th century. Will this 21st century be much more of the same? Are we in this century witnessing the birth pangs of another world war, one that will be fought on every continent every town and city on the planet, or will we attain global peace and security by coming to the realization that EVERYONE MATTERS?

One man taught us that there is a difference between politicians and global statesmen who provide humanity with true leadership - Will we be content to be mere politicians or shall we be leaders and declare in unison that EVERYONE MATTERS?

Madiba who was regarded most of his life as “the other” spent 27 years in prison for it. From within the icy confines of his tiny cell on Robben Island he dared to think deeply about this profound question: does Everyone Matter? – this single thought liberated a nation that was otherwise doomed to self-destruct. It is this single but profound thought that lingers like a candle in the darkness harkening humanity towards its hope and comfort.

Twenty years ago, we witnessed the miracle that was South Africa’s peaceful transformation into a democracy and its acceptance into the Community of Nations. While not without challenges, the peoples of the South African nation are irreversibly joined in the common values of human dignity, equality and a celebration of our diversity which is inspired by the knowledge that Everyone Matters.

It is this thought that will inspire nations to resolve their differences and to chart a new way- without bloodshed and the flowing tears of children. The idea that EVERYONE MATTERS holds the key to unlocking the tragedies of the oppressed and yearning peoples of the Central African Republic, Sudan, South Sudan, Somalia, Mali, Palestine, Libya, Syria, Iraq Afghanistan and so many other places where mindless violence and destruction rears its head. This is indeed the key to global security and lasting peace. This simple thought holds the power to deliver each of us from the shackles of our own limiting prejudices unlocking our true potential. If we are a species deserving of the term “humanity”, we are enjoined to think new thoughts and act in a brave new way that ensures that in our time and for all time Everyone Matters!

At the UN General Assembly last week, President Zuma reflected that in the past few months, humanity stood by helplessly as we witnessed in the comfort of our living rooms a devastating conflict and humanitarian crises of shocking proportions. The President referred to the bereaved people of Palestine who but for a twist of history are excluded from the mandate of the UNHCR, but who are nonetheless refugees, without homes without basic medical facilities, without drinking water but more importantly live without hope. South Africa condemned the violent actions of both Israel and Hamas, and holds firm that there can be no military solution to the Israeli-Palestinian question. We hold this view whether in Gaza or Juba; Bangui or Bagdad.

Given our heritage and history we are mindful of our moral responsibility in the global struggle against chauvinism and intolerance. We will in this regard continue to be at the forefront of efforts to protect refugees and to assist the people of our continent and the world to find solutions to refugee producing situations through dialogue and mutual respect with the fundamental understanding that regardless of differences between us - Everyone Matters.

South Africa’s commitment to a vision of a peaceful Africa and world, is evidenced in our foreign policy which centrally encourages dialogue among communities and parties in conflict, to allow for a return to stability, peace and prosperity for all - because we in South Africa are testament to that simple truth that Everyone Matters.

The UN proclaimed an international day to commemorate Madiba’s birthday. Madiba has the single distinction of having received this honour while he was living amongst us. No other person has been accorded this honour. This son of Africa who taught us that Everyone Matters was in every sense was a citizen of the world. His legacy now belongs to all of us. May his legacy thrive and may humanity prosper thereby!

I Thank You

