

Conference on Reconciliation and Change

Ambassador Ebrahim Rasool—"Eyewitness Account: South Africa"

✧ September 14th, 2012, 8:30 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. ✧
Miami Dade College, Wolfson Campus

Ambassador Ebrahim Rasool—Eyewitness Account, South Africa:

Thank you very much Pat Doherty, Member of Parliament, for an insightful journey through a very long and difficult history. Thank you very much Carlos Saladrigas and the Cuba Study Group for convening this and bringing me here. And my dear friend Wendy Luers from the Project on Justice in a Time of Transition, for making me believe that this is a doable exercise and I need not be afraid. And also our leaders of faith and members of the diplomatic core who are here.

My dear friends, I want to start off with a little story and I will end off, hopefully, with something scriptural. But the story really is one of a man, who one very dark night walks down the road and sees someone else crouching under a street lamp, searching for something. And he goes up to him and asks, "Can I help you?" The man says he has lost his car keys and could he help search for them. After 5, 10, 15 minutes, they realized they were not finding anything. So he says to the man, "Are you sure you lost it here, we are not finding it?" The man replies, "I do not think I lost it here, but this is the only place where the light is shining."

And so, the story that we heard from Father Schreiter this morning, the story that we heard from Pat Doherty this morning, is about the courage to get out to the unlit areas where we've lost our car keys. Far too often we search only where our memory has guided us to, where our history lights up, the space where we are familiar with the language, where we

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know the people, where we nurse our wounds, and find comfort in our victimhood, and are therefore reticent to move to the areas where the keys can be found. And that's the long story of South Africa. And like Pat Doherty, I simply want to give you a birds-eye-view of a 300-year history of colonialism and apartheid in South Africa. And I say that because we are all familiar with what we sometimes call the miracle of South Africa. And while coming from a Muslim tradition, I do believe in miracles, I think that when you call something a "miracle", and you ignore how something evolves as a miracle over 300 years, you begin to believe that there is no place for human agency; that what happened in South Africa cannot be done by ordinary human beings elsewhere in the world. I've picked up a tendency to deify Nelson Mandela, to call what he has done a "miracle", and then say it is impossible to do it between the Palestinians and the Israelis. We don't have a Nelson Mandela. The moment you call it a "miracle", you deactivate yourself and you remove yourself as an agent of the divine, a human agent, and someone with the capability to really get into the unlit areas and do the brave thing. And that, really I think, is what we need to understand.

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Three hundred years ago, we had conquest and slavery starting off in my hometown of Cape Town and spreading over southern Africa. The Koi and the San, the original people who encountered the Dutch when they arrived, have literally been wiped out. There has almost been a genocide. Their language has to be reconstructed from fragments because it does not exist as a language to speak about. And when my ancestors, the Malays, were brought to Cape Town as slaves and as exiles from Indonesia, Malaysia and other places conquered by the Dutch, with the discovery of gold and diamonds in South Africa, a bitter competition between two colonial powers ensued, the Dutch and the British ensued, eventually won by the British. And that ushered in, at the turn of the century, toward the 1900's, ushered in a period of segregation and colonialism. And I mention that because we may often find it more comfortable to blame a group of Afrikaners, people of Dutch descent, for the whole history of South Africa, and forget that there was an intervening period where the British had laid the basis of much of this segregation that we had experienced; laid the basis for the "homeland" system, like the Indian reservation system.

And then, in 1948, with the victory in the white elections of the National Party, they perfected the art of apartheid, of not only of separating people but of dispossessing people and perfecting a machinery to enforce it; perfecting a legal system. If you do not understand the depth of apartheid, if you don't understand how land was divided into group areas and people moved into it if you were in the right group or out of it if you were not the right group. How schools were segregated. How they spent time on segregating not only schools but curricula. Blacks were not allowed to learn math and science. And if you want to understand the origin of the unemployability that we have in South Africa, then you have got to understand that in today's competitive economy, you cannot have people who have not seen the inside of a math or science textbook.

I want to further say that South Africa is a diverse society. We have all these layers of colonial people, whether they were the French Huguenots, whether they were the Portuguese who migrated southwards when the Portuguese colonies collapsed, whether they were the Dutch colonials, or the British, and those soldiers who came for the Angle-Boer War, from Scotland and everywhere else, to settle there. Then you have got African tribes who have settled. Asians, who came as indentured laborers from India to work on the sugar fields of South Africa, which brought Mahatma Gandhi to South African just over a 100 years ago. And then the colored people who were the remnants of the Koi and the San, the Malays who came there as slaves, and people generally of mixed origin. And that creates the very kind of diverse and very kind of complex society that we are.

We have the most diverse and dynamic economy on the continent of Africa. We are able to export today to the U.S.A., anything from oranges, to diamonds, right to every C-Class Mercedes Benz that drives in the U.S.A is made in South Africa. That's how diverse and dynamic the South African economy is.

Against that, we probably have one of the highest Gini coefficients in the world, which measures the gap between your highest income earners and your lowest income earners, and the closer you go toward one, the more unequal your society is and we are at 0.68. It could be understandable if it wasn't color-coded. And that makes of South Africa a tenuous society, because where the black person comes from the shack with no water and no electricity and looks after the children of the one who lives in an eight-bedroom mansion, the disparity stares at you every day. And hence the kinds of tragedies we have had at our mines in recent times. We've got huge social backlogs in education, in health, in welfare and all of those kinds of things, and so we do not have the luxury, if our society is to hold, and the reconciliation is to hold, we need to create a safety net for those who can not find their wherewithal in the economy as well as those who are unemployable, despite their will to work. And therefore we have constructed a safety net that consists of benefits that the state would give people.

And I thought that maybe that snapshot of a 300-year history and how we have arrived today is very important. The struggle against apartheid is as old as the first arrival over 300 years ago. The last anti-colonial tribal uprising was crushed

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at the turn of the century, just before we reach the year 1900. The ANC [African National Congress] was formed in 1912, which makes it the oldest liberation movement in Africa, and celebrates its centenary this year. It was formed in 1912, largely by people of faith, priests, and people of middle-class origin in order to oppose a law that was going to come in 1913, which was the 1913 Land Act, which effectively took 80% of the population and put them into 13% of the land, and the rest of the land, the 77%, would effectively be in the hands of a white minority. That group of ANC leaders were gentlemen, in both the gender sense of the word as well as in that sense of the word that speaks to their tactics. They loaded some of the eminent leaders onto a ship one day to go a visit Queen Victoria, to appeal to her, to please be kinder to the blacks in South Africa. And for many decades they persisted with the ability of petitions, appeals, and delegations to whoever was willing to listen to them to alleviate the plight.

It was in the 1920's, when South Africa industrialized rapidly at the hands of diamonds and gold coming to the surface in great numbers, and them needing this cheap, black labor to come in to Johannesburg and places like that, that a workers-conscience developed. And ironically, it was largely the east-European communists who came to South Africa fleeing the Gulags, and many of Jewish origin who created, firstly a communist party in South Africa, and secondly a militancy in South Africa. And so we had, in 1924, a white workers strike calling for the establishment of a white-workers republic. These tactics translated to the blacks, and in the 1940's, we had massive uprisings in the mines that were partly responsible for the National Party coming to power, promising the white electorate a suppression of all of this activism. So, as the National Party came to power, so did the ANC radicalize. That is when Nelson Mandela was member of the ANC Youth League with O.R. Tambo and other comrades of his, and they took over the leadership of the ANC and said "Let us go back to the tactics and strategies of Mahatma Gandhi –*satyagraha*- a militant, passive resistance." And the 1950's saw massive uprisings of that kind of militant, peaceful nature.

The last campaign was the burning of passes which every black had to carry and could be subjected to jail if were in a city without it. And that led to the burning of passes in Sharpeville, and on that day 1960, 69 people were shot, most of them in the back. That was, firstly, the most brutal suppression the apartheid state was capable of, and that was the moment in

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which Nelson Mandela understood that even militant, passive resistance was not going to be sufficient and he became the first commander of the African National Congresses' guerilla army, *Umkhonto we Sizwe*, or the "Spear of the Nation." And I say this because it really begins to deal with the issue of whether we are dealing almost with little gods, or whether we are dealing with people who have evolved with the history of South Africa.

Nelson Mandela did not come as a gentle soul into the world. His 27-years in prison was his battle with his soul. He was the founding commander of the guerilla army; an angry young man, who overthrew the old leaders of the ANC and, like Moses after his intemperate action, in the court of Pharaoh, or like Jonah learning patience in the belly of the whale. And like every other prophet, Nelson Mandela, too, had to discipline his soul for the task ahead of him. It wasn't much later that Nelson Mandela, and the whole leadership of the ANC, were locked up for life in Robben Island, the prison off the coast of Cape Town. The rest of the leadership fled before they could be caught, and O.R. Tambo led the ANC from Lusaka in Zambia.

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The world did roaring trade with South Africa, because the world was mostly on the gold standard, and we had what the world wanted: bullion. And that was the greatest boon that South Africa experienced; and for that decade resistance had been crushed. It was in the 1970's that the revival of that resistance began to emerge again. It started off with the dockworkers' strike in 1973, then the Soweto school uprising where in one day 500 children were shot in a peaceful march in Soweto that inflamed the country. And with the overthrow of the Portuguese in Mozambique by FRELIMO [The Liberation Front of Mozambique], suddenly a new future seemed possible for South Africa, and therefore we knew then that we were on the final stretch towards freedom.

It was almost to the day this week, 35 years ago, that Steve Bantu Biko was tortured to death in the prisons of South Africa. And it was in the 1980's that probably the greatest mass movement formed in South Africa, the United Democratic Front, because the ANC itself was banned. That entire struggle stood on 4 pillars: the mass mobilization, the political underground, the guerilla army, and the international isolation of South Africa. And that is where people in the United States, despite who was in the White House, refused to buy South African goods, marched outside our embassy, pressured their leaders to introduce sanctions against South Africa. This happened almost all over the world because the anti-apartheid struggle had caught the moral imagination of the world. It was a way to be good for many people in the world.

What I think is important also, is that the seeds of how a struggle sometimes ends is laid in how the struggle is contacted. And so we understood always that we were never against white people, we were against the system of apartheid. It is the ability to distinguish between the individuals and the people who make up a system and the system itself. And hence, no UDF or ANC platform was without a white person speaking against apartheid.

Whether it is Father Trevor Huddleston or Joe Slovo or whoever the case may be, because we needed to teach blacks as well, that here is a white who is not like those oppressing you and therefore we cannot hate whites, but at the same time we denounced blacks who worked with the system to show that we were as capable of bad things. That was a very important distinction. Other key distinctions—and I raise this because I come from a Muslim background, and the Muslim world is in deep trouble, so I find myself, whether it is with a brotherhood across north Africa, or whether it is with a range of other Muslim groups, to teach these distinctions as they try and navigate a different path in the world today. How can you have a struggle

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or movement that is militant, but not violent; that is radical, that goes to the roots of things, but not fundamentalist; that is revolutionary, that wants to change things, but not extremist? And those are the elusive distinctions in the world today and hence we see the kinds of things that are happening, particularly today across the Muslim world. The inability to make those distinctions—and some of us may not have the wherewithal for violence, the wherewithal for fundamentalism, the wherewithal for extremism, but it does not, sometimes, make us less violent, less extreme in the attitudes that we bring to

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a problem. And we have to examine how we can drive those distinctions. How to be right, but not to do wrong. And those become absolutely critical lessons that we learn outside of South Africa.

Our transition to democracy more or less coincided with the fall of the Berlin Wall because suddenly when the Berlin Wall fell, Africa was no longer an important theatre for the Cold War. And so we understood that while it was intensely personal and national for us, that we were inserted into bigger realities that we did not always understand. And each of us has to examine whether the bigger reality has shifted sufficiently for us now to get over some of our national, personal, and community considerations. When that opportunity opened up, that Ronald Reagan no longer needed to prop up apartheid in order to keep out the communists, things became possible, peace became possible, a resolution became possible. So there was a shift in the global balance.

The ANC immediately seized on this by going to the frontline states, our neighboring states, Mozambique, Zimbabwe, Zambia, Botswana, and Namibia and so forth, as well as the Organization for African Unity, with the Harare Declaration in which we began to lay the basis for discussion, because we knew that there are windows which open in life and if you don't go through them, they close again. And then you will forever live with your timidity. And we understood, at that moment, what courage meant. Courage is not the opposite of cowardice. The opposite of cowardice is recklessness. Courage is the perfect middle. Because you have the ability when you are courageous to have enough caution and to avoid recklessness and therefore each one of us has to find within ourselves our courage.

And that is when we knew we had to get through that window and the ANC crossed the Harare Declaration to build a consensus that the time for dialogue has come. But we also sold the Harare Declaration inside the country amongst all the forces of liberation to say to them the time has come to talk. And we understood because we had learned that in those talks we had to set a framework, but not too detailed for the talk, because you had to give the leadership a mandate that was open enough; and so we understood the notion of adherence to principle and flexibility of tactics.

In confusing sometimes principles and tactics, we tried to give our leadership a mandate that is so tight that if someone just once says "no," they are compelled to walk out. And so how do we create an adherence to principle and objectives, but a flexibility of strategies and tactics?

It happens when you have trusted leadership, tested leadership like Nelson Mandela and others. And so a step that we have to learn amongst ourselves first is to invest each other with trust to believe in the bona fides of each other. And to

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understand that those who we invest our trust in are so steeped in us that their instincts beat with us. It is not being foolish, but it is not also being foolish in not investing trust for people to go and see where that path takes them.

At that same time we understood that we needed also not to treat our so-called enemy, the National Party or the Afrikaners, as a monolith, because that is the other thing that we do. We paint everyone with the same brush and we are so filled with righteous fury that we do not see the schisms and the gaps amongst them and so we started to say to the intelligencia, “Listen, you have more intelligence than P.W. Botha, the president of South Africa. You know that this is unsustainable, come and talk to us.” To go to the sportspeople, especially those in rugby, and you’ve seen, many of you, *Invictus*, to know how important rugby is, to go the sportspeople and say, “You are probably the world champions, but you are not allowed to play; we will give you the opportunity to play; come and talk to us.” To say to business people, “We cannot implode that which we hope to inherit; we cannot destroy so utterly the economy that we all want to inherit one day. Let’s take the step right now.” And when we began to probe, we found on the other side, the necessary takers. It is when you treat your enemy as a monolith that you make enormous strategic mistakes because you cannot see the opportunities, the real agents for change amongst the others.

Sometimes you are right to have fury, but you must never have a riotous fury that blinds you to the opportunity to do good. And the mantra of the ANC was, “We isolate only our most extreme enemy and invite everyone else to us. And we unite the broadest coalition of those around us, except those who will compromise us in our principles.” And if we work between those two mantras, how do we possibly begin to dissect, as we dissected the Afrikaner monolith, and we isolated them, so much so that their right wing broke away and formed their own party, but weakened themselves irrevocably. And by splitting off from the National Party, they weakened the National Party so much that the National Party needed other people to look after them. So it is in these tactics and strategies that I think we need to be able to move forward.

And then we began to know each other; we invited people to Dakar to just have talks. We then moved from just getting to know each other to really beginning to have talks about talks, to examine what are the possibilities and limitations that

we have initially with us so we understood how far we can go now and what the things are that hold you back and then to use this and begin to shape an agenda for discussions. It was then that we went to CODESA [Convention for a Democratic South Africa] and did much the same thing. We had an all-inclusive process, but took out a warranty that between the two big parties you could create the basis for sufficient consensus. It’s all in, but no one has a veto to hold you back. When the two big parties, the ANC on one side and the National Party on the other, were prepared to move forward, there was sufficient consensus.

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And then, very importantly, don't give anyone a veto. I met with some Palestinians the other day and said, "Your problem is that so many of you have your trigger on the veto in that Middle East peace process." If Hamas fears that Fatah and Israel will reach an agreement, they just need to fire rocket, and Israel withdraws; the peace talk ends. On the other side, when progress is made between the Palestinians and the Israelis you just need one general to raise something, or a right-wing person to occupy a piece of land. You cannot give the veto away. One needs to understand how to protect the right to veto to the point of not having a veto over what must be discussed.

In our discussion we understood the need to give our antagonists, the National Party, enough to go back with to comfort their constituency. Because we understood one very important principle: we are each other's keepers. Once you start engaging, we are each other's keepers. Because the process of initial engagement means that the ANC may be dislocated from the more radical elements within the liberation movement and the National Party from

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the more conservative elements in the apartheid state. And once you move to the center, you tend to leave behind the people on the extremes. But once you move, you have got to be each others keepers, and so we needed to develop what we called "sunset clauses," so as the sun sets on apartheid and on white hegemony, how do we make it comfortable for them? And so, for example, we had a government of national unity provision for 5 years, where Nelson Mandela would be president, and if F.W. de Klerk got sufficient votes he would be vice-president, and according to their votes that is how they will share the cabinet and legislature of South Africa. After 300 years of struggle what is 5 more years of compromise? We did sunset clauses to give job security to white civil servants, but to do it in a way that they became the servants of the nation and not an ideology. And that was Nelson Mandela's particular charm. That he was able to even counter the idea of counter-revolution from the army and the police—largely white bodies in South Africa.

We held the prospect of amnesty as something that we will do. Our constitution incorporated the recognition of 11 languages as official languages of South Africa—we built inclusiveness in it. Our flag has the most colors out of any other country—6—because it shows the convergence of the Liberation movement with the National Party, with the white color in-between. So those were the ways in which we began to build up a sense of inclusiveness.

We understood that we needed to move toward reconciliation. Instead of going only for reconciliation we established, under the leadership of Archbishop Tutu, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and set up truth and reconciliation almost as tradable commodities. If you told the truth, then you would move us towards reconciliation; there is no sweeping under the carpet; the hard truths had to come out. And if you did that successfully not only would you get reconciliation, you would also get amnesty. If you refuse to be truthful about your role, you would have to face a court and go to jail. So there was a hard-edge to it, given the whole history that I have outlined for you.

We needed to have a disclosure of the truth. But it was at that moment that we began to understand when we worked out this truth and reconciliation and the future shape of our society that we needed to understand what justice means, because that was the demand, the central demand for 300 years: *we want justice*. And we understood three definitions of justice: one was absolute justice as applied at Nuremberg. That is the justice of the victor who with righteous fury can go deal with the perpetrators. We understood that that was neither allowed for by the times nor desirable for healing the nation. And therefore we made a

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combination of transitional justice and restorative justice. And transitional justice we understood as justice, which takes you from where you are to where you want to be. If you have no sense of your objective, you can apply absolute justice, but if you knew your destination and needed to get there, you needed the application of justice that got you there.

There are so many of us that want to get to a place, but in the road that we take, we destroy any prospect of getting to that place. And restorative justice responded to the need in us as South Africans to overcome the disposition that we had suffered through the Land Act, through “group areas,” through other acts of disposition. So we introduced into our body politic those two notions of justice, transitional and restorative.

It was in that context that reconciliation was an exchange, not a gift. It was an exchange for truth. It had to be a security policeman who tortured someone to death and buried his body somewhere in a field, to take the matter to it; to take out those bones, with the parents, and be able to say, “I am very sorry for what I have done, I ask your forgiveness.” And so it was not forgiveness that was un-contextual, it was forgiveness that was absolutely in the context, in the extreme cases, of taking the family and the parents to the body and looking the mother and the father in the eye and saying, “please forgive me.” It was only when those circumstances coincided that forgiveness happened. And it was not the state who pardoned, it had to start with the family. And we were very blessed. Some of the most gentle people, on whom some of the most horrific had been done, had the capacity, which was so fulsome to forgive. Because by that time we understood that there was a further place to go than simply to solve my own hurt and my own injury. We were able to put our individual injuries in the context of the injury of a nation and the need for the nation to heal itself and move down the line. We needed to deal with our memory. Was our memory going to be the transfer of resentment, of bitterness, and of revenge to the next generation or was it a resolve that such a tragedy will never ever fall on our nation again, and that it must forever be a lesson to the rest of the world? And we chose the latter.

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But we understand that in that we must not rush in South Africa to a post-racial world when we are still healing the wounds. Because sometimes we apply the language of post-racialism and we bury resentments, and hurts, and injuries under it. We needed to reconstruct our identity; to get rid of the

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racial epithets that have been inculcated in us for 300 centuries. We need to define the mode of our co-existence because it is easy to go into an isolationist co-existence where we are atomized communities, side by side, without contact. It is easy to take the assimilationist one, where we leave who we are at the boundary and come in to a new South Africanism. Or do we integrate our integrities, where I can be a proud South African, but I can be Muslim South African, I can be a Muslim South African of Malay origin, while integrating my small identity within a bigger, national identity.

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And those are the challenges that we are working through. We have got to reconstruct our identity, or mode of existence. We must understand that what we demand for ourselves, we must be prepared to give to others. That the moment you open up the door of discrimination to others, you open it up to yourself.

When I want a mosque in New York, I must fight for a church in Saudi Arabia—those are the tests of consistency that we must need to face as we go forward.

And there must also be a material basis to reconstruction and development. We may not compensate each one, and we have chosen not to compensate each one in South Africa for the piece of land you lost, for the house that you lost, the income that you lost. It will be an impossible task because we would take all of our fiscus, spend it on that, and have no money for the reconstruction of our country. But we created the safety net so that no one is undignified by a severer degree of poverty than they need to be.

So how do you make the compensation collective but meaningful, and not necessarily individual, especially when there is not the wherewithal for each one to be compensated individually? Most importantly, the most important shift in identity through this entire process is to divest yourself of the identity of victim. Victims cannot negotiate; they can only trade victimhood. Victims cannot decide, they can only compete on whose victimhood is greater—and that is a zero-sum game. Victims cannot be agents because they have given up their autonomy to a greater emotion that what is needed to direct your life as you go forward.

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And so, I think, and this is really where I want to end on a scriptural note. One of the key mantras in the Koran, that I have grown up with, is when God says in the Koran, “I have blown of my spirit into you.” I was surprised, when I read one of the Epistles of St. John, which says, “Who lives in love, lives in God, and God in them” and ends with, “This you must know, I have given you of my spirit.” And then I read, somewhere from the Torah, God describing that, “I have blown of my spirit through your nostrils.” How is it, that all of us who share the Abrahamic tradition, share the same idea of what is the core ingredient of this body that we have here? That each one of us has been invested with a portion of the divine, because that core ingredient is that spirit that has been blown into us. And we are learning in South Africa not to see each other’s color but to see the divine in each other. How not to see how each one prays, but how to see the divine at work in each one of us. How not to look at the culture of each one only, but to see how the divine expresses itself in manifold cultures. How not to judge on the language that you hear, but to hear the divine speaking whenever they speak. And that really is where I think we need to respond. We need to see not the enemy, but appeal to the divine in the one who today may be our enemy. Because the reason that divine is within us is because there is always in each one of us a moral compass to which we can appeal. We can never give up on human beings as long as they are carriers of a portion of the divine and share it with us. Thank you very much.