

STATEMENT AT THE 56<sup>TH</sup> SESSION ON THE AFRICAN COMMISSION ON HUMAN  
AND PEOPLES' RIGHTS

GENDA 4 (e) HUMAN RIGHTS SITUATION IN AFRICA

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Good day Honourable Commissioners. My name is Asha Ramgobin and I represent the Human Rights Development Initiative (HRDI).

Ever since we obtained observer status in 2010, we had one mission is our work with the Commission and that is to ensure that the voice of the grassroots is heard here, loudly, clearly and mostly that it is responded to. We brought a woman who lives openly with HIV in 2010 and she made the case for the establishment of what was to become the HIV Committee. We consulted our partner law clinics who enabled us to bring issues to the attention of the Commission that affected ordinary people living with HIV, disabled children and other ordinary people who are vulnerable mostly because they are poor. We are so glad that all the issues that we raised have indeed been responded to.

In preparation for this session we have instead sought inspiration from leaders who are no longer here but whose lives and work continue to shine light at times of darkness – Nelson Mandela, Julius Nyerere, Steve Biko, Chris Hani and Che Guevara.

I was told by a law professor at the University of Dar es Salaam that under the leadership of Mwalimu Julius Nyerer, when they were students in the 1960s they not only housed exiles from Soth Africa but also contributed money towards an anti-apartheid fund . the government of Tanzania in fact gave South Africans in exile Tanzanian identity documents. A Tanzanian student of mine told me that just before school ended each day they recited a statement highlighting that apartheid is evil and that Nelson Mandela should be released from prison.

During his inauguration speech in 1994 Nelson Mandela said:

“Never, never and never again shall it be that this beautiful land will again experience the oppression of one by another:

Madame Chairperson, South Africa’s Freedom Charter begins with the words “South Africa belongs to all who live in it”. It was both a promise and a statement of intent.

Ordinary people of South Africa gathered in Kliptown on the 26<sup>th</sup> of June 1955 and declared not only to themselves, not only to their oppressors but for the whole world to know that "SOUTH AFRICA BELONGS TO ALL WHO LIVE IN IT!"

But what has happened to that promise? What has happened to that statement of intent? Today, almost 60 years later as I stand here and reflect on the human rights situation in Africa, I ask myself how is it that after such a fight against such a power, we are now here: Where one African is killing another in South Africa.

The only word that comes to mind is betrayal.

I could stand here and blame only the Zulu King because his statements were incendiary and maybe this is a revival of Zulu nationalism at its worst.

In reality there are many ordinary people who were either promised something or who are trying to build something: a better life, a better future, a better world. Instead they have been fighting each other to just survive and some even look to their oppressive past under apartheid thinking that they were better off then.

What kind of betrayal can lead people to the awful situations we have witnessed?

I am reminded of a line of Ch Guevara when he said that "the life of a single human being is worth a million times more than all the property of the richest man on earth." How many of us truly believe this? Have we become numb to the deaths of children in acts of terror, the killing of foreigners, mine workers, the deaths that result from Ebola. After a while the statistics stop penetrating the heart.

Madame Chairperson, it is when the suffering of people stops affecting our hearts and when we begin to discuss extreme suffering and exploitation in a routine, business-like manner that we start to betray those whom we are here to serve.

In Rwanda and Burundi, they talk of the importance of the 'Inyangamugayo' and 'Abashingantahe' – a difficult to translate term but essentially refers to a person of integrity. A person whose word means something. A person who can be relied upon for their integrity. In our work on human rights, we find that the absence of this essential quality not only affects our ability to achieve what we set out to, but essentially affects the lives of ordinary people whom we seek to serve. By we I mean all of us, the Commission, the Secretariat, the states and civil society.

In our analysis, this appears to be a time of extreme darkness. And, during this time of darkness our team at HRDI are looking for the light in our respective organizations, here at the Commission, within the governments of our countries, in big companies, everywhere.

We call on the Commission to include in their declarations and resolutions the essential link between human rights work and integrity.

Madame Chairperson, I would like to end with the words of Rabindranath Tagore who said and I quote:

Where the mind is without fear and the head is held high

Where knowledge is free

Where the world has not been broken up into fragments by narrow domestic walls

Where words come out from the depth of truth

Where tireless striving stretches its arms towards perfection

Where the clear stream of reason has not lost its way into the dreary desert sand of dead habit

Where the mind is led forward by thee into ever-widening thought and action

Into that heaven of freedom, my Father, let my country awake.