

RUMBLE IN THE SOUTH AFRICAN JUNGLE!

DEMOCRATIC SOUTH AFRICA AND THE TRUTH

Mr Thabo Mbeki

December 17, 2011

During the fortnight since City Press published the interview with Advocate Willem Heath, I have been inundated with media requests to comment on the substance of the allegations made by Heath.

Some of the questions posed have suggested that it was indeed possible that during the time I served as President of South Africa, I could have committed the criminal and unconstitutional offences as alleged by Heath.

My Office has issued a statement which has correctly stated my unequivocal assertion that all the allegations made by Heath are false, malicious and defamatory.

I am ready to defend this assertion in any forum.

Nevertheless I respect the fact that Heath made the allegations he did, presumably based on information in his possession and his constitutionally guaranteed right to freedom of speech.

This is because it is vitally important that our young democracy must accept the principle and practice of the rule of law, which prescribes that even Heads of State and Government are not above the law.

Obviously, in the context of both natural justice and statutory law, all opportunity should be provided to Heath freely and without fear of retribution to produce the facts which would substantiate his allegations.

Among other things, this is necessary because of the obligation to respect the guaranteed right to freedom of speech.

At the same time it is absolutely necessary that we understand that in no way does this right permit for its abuse to propagate falsehoods, and wilfully make defamatory and libellous statements. Inherent to the right are various obligations.

All of us must therefore look beyond the seemingly simple matter of the veracity or otherwise of the Heath allegations.

In this regard I am certain that in time this particular issue will be resolved, relating to a definitive determination of the truth.

Our fundamental national challenge is that we must integrate in everything we do – and therefore in our ‘national DNA’ - the understanding and practice that to defeat the apartheid crime against humanity, we agreed that we would establish a constitutional democracy anchored on an inalienable Bill of Rights.

This means that we agreed to establish a law-governed society, in which, among other things, the rights of the individual would be protected and all statutory law would respect the perimeters prescribed in the letter and spirit of our Constitution, including its Bill of Rights.

The statement issued by my Office on December 8 responding to the Heath allegations, made the following important observation:

“In the past, former President Mbeki has drawn attention to the use of fabrications to advance particular political agendas and to divert attention from the pressing challenges of the day. If our broad leadership at all levels of society does not address this tendency, it may become an indelible part of our political culture and make it impossible for our country to address the real challenges we face.”

For far too long, since the establishment of our democracy in 1994, we have repeatedly seen determined efforts to ensure that the national discourse is dominated by issues which have absolutely nothing to do with our real and pressing national matters.

An example of this, in the context of this article, is the diversionary heat which has been generated by Heath’s allegations.

The principal observation I am making is that we have allowed for some in our country to use various peripheral issues to divert us from focusing on the most important challenges we face as a country and a people.

Again I must insist that it is absolutely correct that all necessary action is taken to address all allegations, as happened and will happen with regard to the so-called ‘arms deal’.

In exactly the same way it is absolutely correct that all necessary action is taken to investigate in a transparent manner the allegations made by Heath which centrally question my own and the honesty and integrity of our previous administrations since 1994.

I must confess that the extremely defamatory allegations made so unequivocally by Heath, which a respected South African periodical, City Press, chose to publish, forced me to engage in some introspection.

I fully accept that others, rather than me, may very well be better placed critically to judge the quality of my performance as our country’s Head of State and Government.

However, over the years, very many people inside and outside our country have pressed me to write and publish my Memoires, convinced that these would help especially our people further to deepen their understanding of the processes relating to the transformation of apartheid South Africa into a non-racial democracy.

Among other things, this correctly assumes that I have various facts at my disposal which have not as yet seen the light of day, but which are essential pieces of the jigsaw puzzle which explains the evolution of South Africa over a number of decades, to this day.

As I engaged in the process of introspection, arising from the Heath allegations, I was mindful of the reality that indeed I am familiar with a unique body of facts and a broad reality to which I had access solely because, over many years, I had the rare privilege to serve in the highest echelons of both the ANC and our Government.

It is therefore obvious that I would be familiar with all the matters to which Heath referred relating to my conduct as Head of State and Government.

As I have said, I do hope that in time the opportunity will arise such that the facts about all these issues are disclosed to our people as a whole.

Again as I have said, Court proceedings may provide such an opportunity, as hopefully will the hearings of the projected Judicial Commission of Inquiry into the Defence Procurement Package, the so-called arms deal.

In three weeks' time, the ANC will celebrate its Centenary.

I feel especially honoured and privileged that for many decades I served in its leading echelons in various capacities, from the ANC branches up to its National Executive Committee.

As I engaged in the introspection to which I have referred, occasioned by the Heath allegations, I asked myself the question – when, during these decades, since I became a member of the Youth League in 1956, when Heath was an 11-year-old in apartheid South Africa, did I do anything which amounted to a betrayal of the objectives and the ethical paradigm that have defined the very being of the ANC?

I would like to believe that throughout these decades I have acted as a true cadre of the ANC, informed by a number of fundamental and inalienable prescriptions.

One of these is that one joins the ANC with the sole purpose to serve the people of South Africa, with no expectation of personal gain or personal acclaim and status.

Another is that the ANC, and therefore its members, should conduct themselves in a manner which, based on the actions of the organisation, rather than its word, convinces our people that they can depend on the ANC truly to represent their interests at all times and under all circumstances.

Yet another is that in all its activities the ANC would respect various ethical prescriptions encapsulated in the pedagogy of the erstwhile oppressed of our country, described as 'ubuntu', which was a vitally important part of our upbringing which, hopefully, we carried with us into our adult years.

Among other things, these prescriptions require the celebration of honesty and an aversion to lies; hostility to the abuse of power for personal benefit; respect for all human beings and the inalienable right of every member of society freely to help determine the future of their society; and the understanding that 'I am because you are', all human action must be informed by the realisation that everything should be done to achieve the welfare of all.

In essence, and by implication, Heath has made bold to assert that as our country's Head of State and Government I betrayed all these principles.

These include the very oath of office to which thrice I solemnly swore allegiance at the Union Buildings, in the presence of representatives of our people and the peoples of the world, committing myself to respect our Constitution as well as advance everything which would benefit the people of South Africa.

During the 17 years of our democracy from 1994 to date, the ANC presented to our population General and Local Government Election Manifestoes which committed us to do everything in our power to address our country's fundamental challenges, consistent with the vision spelt out in our National Constitution.

I would like to believe that, at the very least, we did our best to live up to the commitments we made in these Manifestoes.

In reality, regardless of their length, these Manifestoes, including the Local Government Manifestoes, made commitments relating to a few issues.

These related to the eradication of poverty, underdevelopment and unemployment; the elimination of racial, gender and geographic inequalities; the achievement of sustained economic growth and shared development; and the use of affirmative action to speed up the achievement of the objective of social equity.

They also sought to ensure the realisation of the interconnected objectives of national reconciliation and the social transformation as visualised in our Constitution; the deepening of our democracy, building on the proposition that 'the people shall govern'; and moral regeneration – achieving 'the RDP of the soul' - which would militate against crime, corruption and unacceptable social behaviour.

They also aimed to promote the objective of the renaissance of Africa, and striving to ensure the establishment of an equitable system of international relations.

Among other things this would help to ensure that the poor in the world, the majority of humanity, play their rightful role in terms of helping to determine the nature and content of the global system of political, economic, security and social governance, especially within the context of the process of globalisation.

I remain convinced that these are the fundamental and strategic objectives which must surely inform the policies and programmes of all our democratically elected governments, regardless of which formation our electorate chooses freely to elect as our governing party.

These are the issues to which I referred earlier in this article when I wrote about "our real and pressing national matters", which should under no circumstances be drowned by ephemeral and apparently major stories whose only merit is their capacity to generate sensational 'headline' news and salacious gossip.

I would therefore argue that our media, including City Press, which have an acknowledged professional obligation to inform the public, have a related duty continuously to draw the attention of our population to our fundamental national issues.

I am certain that, in this regard, our media has an obligation to resist the temptation to achieve greater popularity, and increased profits, by highlighting stories which amount to no more than the fare on which the tabloid media feasts.

When I served in leading positions in both the ANC and the Government, I made a commitment to all our people honestly to promote the objectives I have detailed above as the strategic goals which informed the content of the ANC Elections Manifestoes to which I have referred.

In his City Press interview, and its essence and real meaning, Advocate Willem Heath argued that I acted in a manner which fatally betrayed the solemn commitments in these Manifestoes.

This is truly a grave accusation which seeks publicly to denounce not only me, Thabo Mbeki, but also everybody else in the ANC and the then Governments, who allowed that I had the possibility and space to perpetrate the gross misdemeanours he alleges.

Heath owes it to our people, to the rest of Africa and the world to substantiate the statements he made. Equally, the rest of us, the accused, have a sacred responsibility to respond honestly and openly to the charges which Heath made.

In the end, the fundamental and critical matter at issue is whether as South Africans, including those mandated by our people through free elections, as I was, we dispose of the necessary integrity to do as we say, and to refuse to allow that personal agendas, of all kinds, assume primacy over everything which serves the genuine interests of all our people.

Through a few choice comments, Heath has denounced at least three of our successive democratic governments, asserting that they were constituted of dishonest and criminal people.

The Heath allegations have provided all of us as South Africans with the welcome opportunity to 'out the truth'.

If we respond honestly to this opportunity, as we surely must, thus would we bury, hopefully once and for all, the pernicious practice of the use of lies to pursue particular political agendas and, alternatively, to use demagoguery, State power and all manner of deception and abuse of authority to hide high State misdemeanours, which Heath claims I did.

In the end it may very well be that the comments made by Heath in his City Press interview will have helped to lance a virulently poisonous boil on our body politic.

This consists of either the shameless propagation of lies by people outside of government to achieve selfish political objectives, or nefarious and disguised actions undertaken by those in positions of power, like me during the period to which Heath refers, fundamentally to betray the interests of the people and negate the objectives spelt out in our Constitution, in their personal interest.

All this dictates that everything should be done to respond to the 'Pandora's box' which Heath opened, with no restrictions.

What should constitute national success in this regard is not whether Willem Heath or Thabo Mbeki emerges as the victor.

The victor should be the truth.

It should also be the unity of our nation as it continues seriously to address the fundamental challenges it faces, refusing to be diverted by self-serving interventions which have absolutely nothing to do with

the objective to build a united, people-centred and winning nation, informed by the principles of ubuntu.