

**Statement by Deputy Minister Ebrahim Ebrahim
Twenty Years of South African Involvement in Conflict Resolution: Lessons
Learned and the Case of Syria
University of Pretoria
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Vice Chancellor Pretorius
Dean of Humanities Professor Duncan
Professors Schoeman and Nathan
Members of the diplomatic corps
Staff and students of the University
Ladies and gentlemen

I wish to thank the Department of Political Sciences and the Centre for Mediation in Africa for the opportunity to address you this evening. I look forward to the exchange of ideas later in the programme during the question and answer session and would like to encourage you to ask tough questions so that we can have a thorough discussion.

My talk will focus on the principles underlying our foreign policy, specifically our approach to conflict prevention and resolution as it has developed since 1994, and at the end I will make an application to the current situation in Syria.

In the past two decades, South Africa has been engaged in assisting various states with conflict resolution and in sharing our experience with regard to transitional justice as well, these include, Palestine, Northern Ireland, the DRC, Cote d'Ivoire, Sudan/South Sudan, Madagascar, Zimbabwe and Sri Lanka to name a few. Time does not permit detailed discussion of all the areas where South Africa has been involved in conflict resolution.

Ladies and gentlemen,

This year South Africa marks the 20th anniversary of our democratic transition – a transition which also marked the end of our country's pariah status and our full integration into the structures and processes of international community, especially those of the African Continent.

Taking our place in the community of nations came with high expectations shaped by our peaceful transition referred to as the "South African miracle" and the iconic status of President Nelson Mandela as a master of reconciliation and forgiveness. In fact, our own peaceful transition from the brink of civil war is central to our approach to disputes and remains an example to the world of how a deeply divided country on the brink of disaster can build a nation through all-inclusive dialogue.

Moreover, South Africa has a moral obligation to act in solidarity with Africa for its unwavering support to the liberation movement as well as for the crimes committed against our neighbours by the apartheid regime. Thus our country's considerable

military and economic capabilities are being deployed in promoting peace and security on the African Continent. Our commitment is further enhanced by the belief that South Africa's security and development is inextricably linked to the welfare of our Continent – we will only be able to fully deliver our development commitments to our own people if we can fully benefit from the economic growth of a Continent at peace with itself.

It is this belief in the central importance of the African Continent to our foreign policy that also guided our engagement in the Continent to support development and peace initiatives. We played an active role in reshaping the Organization for African Unity into the African Union specifically with the aim of strengthening Africa's ability to address conflicts on the Continent. Since its inception in 2002, the African Union has established and consolidated a comprehensive Peace and Security Architecture. The architecture is based on a paradigm that recognises preventive diplomacy as central to eradicating conflicts on our Continent. These mechanisms that the African Union has put in place bear testimony to the determination of our Continent to address peace and security challenges in a comprehensive manner.

The African Union has also made great strides in developing its early warning systems that help the organisation to determine, which countries are likely to lapse or relapse into conflict. These mechanisms afford the organisation with the opportunity to help avert an imminent conflict. However, for these systems to be effective, early warning should be followed by early response – an area which we need to improve on. The fact is for preventive diplomacy to be an effective tool at the Continent's disposal a sustained injection of resources that are predictable, coherent and timely, is required.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Since 1994 a primary foreign policy priority was to accelerate our reintegration into the international community and to promote an international rules-based system through active and constructive participation in multilateral institutions and processes. Furthermore, our foreign policy has been inspired by our history and ethos and guided by our principles, foremost amongst which is the desire for a more just, humane and equitable world. In the conduct of our international relations, we attach the utmost importance to the promotion of human rights, democracy, justice and the international rule of law.

These principles necessarily place the United Nations at the centre of our foreign policy activities, including those aimed at conflict prevention and resolution. The United Nations Security Council has the primary responsibility for the maintenance of international peace and security and acts on behalf of the entire United Nations membership. It is wrong to think that the Council only has one or two options at its disposal, namely sanctions and military intervention. What is often forgotten is that the Security Council should at all times promote the peaceful settlement of disputes and that it should act preventively. The provisions of the UN Charter encourages parties to a conflict, as well the Council, to first and foremost seek negotiated settlements, through mediation, conciliation, arbitration and even judicial means.

Too often then the Council jumps to the provisions of intervention, rather than to encourage prevention, dialogue, and compromise. In addition, the UN Charter reminds us that any action undertaken by the Security Council must be measured, appropriate and without prejudice to the rights, claims and/or positions of the concerned parties.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

With these principles in mind I now turn to the disastrous situation in Syria. We will all agree that the humanitarian crisis brought on by that civil war is a huge human tragedy. After two rounds of UN-sponsored negotiations peace remains elusive. Over the nearly three years of violence the conflict has increasingly become sectarian with increased jihadist activity and extrajudicial killings as well as atrocities perpetrated by all sides. The use of chemical weapons, barrel bombs, allegations of food and water being used as weapons of war, war crimes and crimes against humanity are alarming and lead to despondency over the possibility of achieving a negotiated solution.

In addition, the large number of internally displaced people and refugees fleeing into neighbouring countries has a destabilizing impact on the entire region, with Syria's neighbours being drawn into the sectarian violence. In fact it is no longer accurate to warn against a possible spill-over of the Syrian conflict into the region as some commentators are already describing the situation as a "regional war with an epicentre in Syria."

The only hope for the Syrian people lies in the willingness of the parties to the conflict to immediately put an end to the violence and to engage each other constructively in dialogue with the aim of reaching an agreement on the political transition based on the Geneva Communiqué of June 2012. It is the responsibility of the Syrian Government and the opposition to sincerely engage each other with the aim of reaching difficult decisions over the future of Syria. For this to happen, the parties have to be flexible when engaging each other and genuine in their intent to break the political stale mate.

Democracy is an unassailable right of the Syrian people, but it cannot be achieved by military means. In the end the parties must negotiate with each other, and this requires great courage and strength of will. After all, it is easier to start a war than to end it. However, continued delay in starting substantive discussion on a transitional governing body and future institutions has a heavy price – paid in the blood of innocent civilians.

There is also a real possibility that the continued deadlock perpetuated by intransigence by all the parties in the UN-sponsored negotiations could revive the idea that some form of outside military intervention is necessary to bring about an end to the fighting through the removal of the Syrian regime. Such an action will be catastrophic. The military intervention in Libya was a major miscalculation by the West, contributing to the current chaos in the country. By ignoring the need to foster dialogue between the various groups to discuss the establishment of strong institutions, a future constitution and democratization of Libya, the international community left a fractured Libyan society, which is also destabilizing the region.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Taking a cue from our own history we know that in order for the solution in Syria to be sustainable it must be representative and therefore **no** party can or should be excluded from the peace process. The struggle against apartheid lasted decades and was declared a crime against humanity, nonetheless the transition and the new constitution was negotiated between the liberation movements and the government of the day who were the perpetrators of apartheid. The lesson here is that a lasting solution must be rooted in an all-inclusive process. This is especially important in diverse and polarised societies.

A major concern in this regard is the failure of the internal opposition to participate in the Geneva process and the apparent lack of influence the external opposition has on the fighting on the ground. This is a significant flaw in the process, which can and must be corrected. Failure to do so is likely to make it impossible to implement any decision that is eventually reached in Geneva, including confidence-building measures such as ceasefires and the safe movement of humanitarian workers. It is critical for the mediator to assist the parties to build trust and confidence, but the parties must also understand that they need to work at building trust. In South Africa the various adversaries understood that trust was the most critical aspect for the talks to succeed and they thus had to learn to trust each other as negotiators. If trust is not the basis of the talks **no** agreement will be reached neither will it be sustainable.

Another lesson from our own transition that is applicable to Syria is that discouraging developments should not be the end of negotiations nor of hope. If the parties are truly committed to achieving a political settlement they should continue to work toward finding a way out of the current deadlock. However, it would appear that the various sides in Syria still hold out hope for a military solution to the conflict which implies that they are not fully committed to the establishment of a transitional government leading to a new dispensation in Syria.

In our negotiating process all the parties took ownership of the process and as a result they also took ownership of the outcome. Today, no one can turn around and say that end result of the many years of talks, namely the South African constitution, is not mine. All South Africans, regardless of where they find themselves on the political spectrum know that solution reached is homegrown and therefore ours!

Ladies and gentlemen,

The Syrian process therefore must be Syrian-led and Syrian-owned. The United Nations, the League of Arab States and the rest of the international community can assist the parties and encourage them, but ultimately the future of Syria needs to be determined by the people of Syria and those parties that represent them.

This does not imply that the international community does not have a role to fulfil in support of the peace process. No, in fact a long established rule of mediation and negotiated settlements is that the parties need to see tangible support for the mediator from the international community and in this case specifically from the UN Security Council. South Africa has consistently called for and supported an UN-led mediation process as is being undertaken by Mr Lakhdar Brahimi. We do not see any value added to the processes by alternative international processes such as the Friends of Syria grouping or the alternative conference called by Iran. Furthermore, the supply of weapons to either side is at cross-purpose to that of the mediation efforts and creates a false impression that a military solution can be achieved. It is essential that the political process is supported by a united and cohesive international community.

The primary organ responsible for supporting the process, namely the Security Council, unfortunately, has a dismal record on Syria. In our view the Security Council's failure to consistently support the mediation process, mainly because of the narrow self-interests of some countries, has perpetuated the conflict and ultimately affected the legitimacy of the Council. The international community and the external sponsors of the parties have a particular responsibility in supporting the mediation efforts of the Joint Special Representative, Mr Lakhdar Brahimi, and to make a negotiated settlement more attractive than a military solution. Remember that it took 18 months for the parties to start negotiations after the adoption of the Geneva Communiqué in 2012, and this was only achieved when the United States and the Russian Federation agreed to push the various sides towards the negotiating table.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Another key principle of the South African process is that there are no quick solutions and that the solution you seek should **not** be short term **but** should have a long term perspective. We drafted one of the best constitutions of modern times and the reason was that we asked the correct question, we did not only ask how do we solve today's problem but rather: "where do we want to be as a country in 100 years?"

Ladies and Gentlemen,

In spite of these negative elements there are some positive developments in Syria, such as the continued ceasefire in Homs and the evacuation of vulnerable groups. Although a small step in confidence building it is not enough and we hope that this ceasefire can be expanded throughout the country, and that legitimate humanitarian aid can be brought to the communities who need it.

Furthermore, we are pleased that the parties have agreed to an agenda for the next round of talks, which will focus on four main areas, namely a) security and terrorism; b) the Transitional Governing Body; c) national institutions; and d) national reconciliation and national debate. However we lament the failure of the parties to agree on a date for the start of the third round of talks.

South Africa believes that we must intensify our efforts in support of the mediation effort to end the violence in Syria through diplomacy, by overcoming the divisions within Syria and the international community. We will therefore continue to encourage the Government and the opposition to be brave and to make the key decisions about the country's future that only Syrians can make. We again encourage the parties to continue to engage each other in the spirit of reconciliation and without ultimatums.

In her intervention at the International Conference in support of the Geneva II process, Minister Maite Nkoana-Mashabane stated that: "South Africa is here to offer meaningful support for constructive negotiations between the Syrian parties. We encourage our Syrian brothers and sisters to reach a comprehensive settlement which will implement in full the Geneva Communiqué, within an accelerated time frame."

Ladies and gentlemen,

The ordinary citizens of Syria desire peace and security and wish to get on with their lives. Therefore the mere fact that the parties to this conflict are willing to sit down and talk is a message of hope. It is our responsibility as the international community to ensure that the parties remain at the table and that they negotiate in good faith. This is neither a quick nor an easy process, but every day lost has a heavy price.

I conclude with the words of President Mandela: "Our experience has taught us that with good will a negotiated solution can be found for even the most profound problems"....and "our own humble experience has shown that negotiated solutions can be found even to conflict that the world has come to regard as insoluble. It has taught us that such solutions emerge when former opponents reach out to find common ground."

I thank you!