

Speech by Deputy Minister of International Relations and Cooperation, Mr Ebrahim I Ebrahim, on the occasion of a Public Lecture on “Libya, the United Nations, the African Union and South Africa: Wrong Moves? Wrong Motives? Pretoria University, 15 September 2011.

Programme Director, Prof Africa,
Fellow Speakers on the podium,
High Commissioners and Ambassadors here this evening,
Prof Crewe, Vice-Rector of the University
Prof Schoeman, Head of the Department of Political Studies,
Professors and Lecturers with us,
Members of the media,
Students and staff,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Please allow me to take this opportunity to thank the University of Pretoria for organising this public lecture and extending the invitation to us. By organising this public lecture through the Centre for Mediation in Africa, the Department of Political Sciences, and the Centre for Human Rights, this University is sending out a clear message that it is about time that we familiarize ourselves with the fundamentals of our foreign policy objectives.

Programme Director,

Our President, the Minister, Deputy Minister Fransman and I have used the chief instruments of Public Diplomacy such as lectures, electronic media, publications etc to put across and make known South Africa’s engagements and thoughts on the Libyan crisis. Because we have already highlighted our public diplomacy strategies, I believe ours tonight is to make some reflections on and around the developments in relation to the crisis in Libya. I will also share some perspectives on what I regard as the wider implications of the response of the Western powers on the kind of a world that we as a country wish to see. In order to enrich our discussions this evening, I will conclude my lecture by sharing with you the outcomes of the Ad Hoc Committee meeting of the AU High-Level Panel on Libya, held on 14 September in Pretoria.

You may have noticed that in all our Public Diplomacy engagements, we have continued to condemn the actions of NATO towards Libya. It is very well known that NATO misused the United Nations (UN) resolution 1973 to carry out its bombing escapades on a defenseless African country. In our view, this action completely ignored the other important aspects of the resolution.

Although we have criticized the manner in which NATO has decided to interpret the resolution, however, within the context of the AU position, we remain committed to working with the UN, the League of Arab States, the European Union (EU) and others in order to find a lasting solution to the crisis in Libya. We have also insisted that the foundations for laying a lasting peace could only come from a negotiated and inclusive political settlement leading to democratic elections.

Programme Director,

Inspired by the Freedom Charter, the South African Government has always believed that every citizen of the world is entitled to enjoy their fundamental human rights and freedom, including the right to live in dignity. This is a right, which we wish not only for the peoples of Libya, and Syria, but equally for the peoples of Bahrain, Yemen, and other countries which in the recent past have seen their people rising up. I say this because, for whatever reason, there seems to be concerted efforts to selectively focus on the issue of Libya, as well as Syria, while ignoring other situations right now in the Middle East and North Africa whose challenges may require similar, if not more, attention of the international community.

I am of the view, and perhaps we can debate this further during the question and answer session, that the situation and the case of Libya, has long ceased to be characterized within the broader developments which have come to be popularly known as the *Arab Spring*, especially the events that unfolded in Tunisia and Egypt. This is the case, because the people of Egypt and Tunisia, who took to the streets demanding their freedom, did so peacefully. In the case of Libya, what we had was an armed insurrection and it was therefore necessary for the AU to intervene to bring all stakeholders together to address the legitimate demands of the people through dialogue and negotiations.

Programme Director,

Our position on Libya is not divorced from our approach to issues of peace and stability, both on the African continent and indeed other parts of the world. And this approach is the settlement of international disputes through dialogue.

As we speak today, Libya remains divided, its civilian population has been severely affected by the resulting aerial bombing by NATO, the march by the rebels to Tripoli, and indeed by the actions of that country's armed forces—all these due to failure to create a conducive environment for dialogue. You would have read that the Libyan NTC Health Minister recently stated that 30 000 people were killed and 50 000 wounded in the six-month conflict, and that he expects the figure to be higher once a final count is completed.

I strongly believe, long after NATO has left Libya, long after the media has shifted its focal lenses and its pens away from Libya, we would still be left with a huge challenge of re-building that country; of making it possible for the Libyans to consider each other as brothers and sisters occupying the same space. This challenge was succinctly captured in the Open Letter from Concerned Africans, which stated:

“At the end of it all, Africa will inherit a much more difficult challenge to successfully address the issue of peace and stability, and therefore the task of sustained development.”

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The current situation in Libya is as a result of the failure to transform the global system of governance. Powerful States remain dominant and imposing over the powerless. This does not augur well for an international system founded on the principles of international peace and security that underpin the UN as an institution. It is precisely for this reason; amongst

many, that we believe we are correct in calling for the reform of the institutions of global governance.

We cannot continue like this! And allow institutions such as the UN, which were formed to preserve and guarantee peace, which were supposed to be the embodiment of humanity's collective resolve to live in peace, to be used to as a military machine to effect regime change. There are those that act as though they own the world, and somehow uniquely know what is good for others. They are opposed to the reform of international institutions because they fear that they would lose the power, informed by their own selfish interests, to dictate to lesser nations about how to conduct their affairs. However, we will not waiver on our call for reforms. We need to advance an international programme that seeks to paralyze this militaristic approach to solving world problems.

Programme Director,

At the centre of our foreign policy is our commitment to peace; stability; and socio-economic development on the continent. This being our stance, we have sought to work with other African countries, to contribute towards strengthening our institutions such as the AU, the Southern African Development Community (SADC) and others, to play and take their rightful place in dealing with challenges facing the continent.

It is unfortunate that right from the start the AU was never given an opportunity to lead in finding a solution to the situation in Libya. The African leadership collective, against all odds, continued to seek to engage the parties, as proposed by Road Map for Peace, and offered to assist the parties engage in a process that would end the Libyan. All of this never worked, because powers outside the continent were determining the future of Libya, and ceaselessly worked not for a political solution but regime change.

As a Government, we have sought to and will continue to work within the structures of the AU and we will respect its decisions. In particular, I am referring to the 291st meeting of the AU Peace and Security Council (AUPSC) which took place on 26 August and resolved that Libya would be welcome to occupy its seat as soon as an all-inclusive transitional government is formed. The AU Ad Hoc High-Level Committee which President Zuma chaired yesterday in Pretoria welcomed the assurances provided by the NTC leadership stressing their strategic commitment to the African continent, and their commitment to "bring together all Libyan stakeholders, without any exception, to re-build the country".

Our on-going analysis and reflections about the character of the international system tells us that powerful States could unilaterally by force of arms begin a process of regime change, if it suits their geo-political interests. To make the point, in 2007, the African National Congress (ANC) made the following observation about our present day international relations:

At the political level, the dominant imperialist powers have historically used various means to asset their geo-political and economic interests. This finds contemporary expression in unilateralism and militarism which have reared their ugly head on a scale hardly witnessed in recent history. In intellectual and policy discourse, notions of empire and benevolent colonialism find respectable articulation. In many respects, the current global balance is

evocative of the situation in previous eras of dominant empires and colonialism when brute force was the currency of geo-political intercourse.

The above characterization has a direct and relevant connection to the conduct of some of the major powers, not only to the situation in Libya, but Ivory Coast, and other cases in the recent past.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I also wish to raise the role of the media since the events in Libya has unfolded. As the saying goes, the first casualty of war is the truth, and I think the media plays a big part in this. In the main, our own local media, which is an important instrument to inform our people about developments of note, has actually failed to do so. For instance, the approach taken by the media, especially the local media, was to create an impression, deliberately or otherwise, that necessarily because we were opposed to the bombing of Libya by NATO, we were therefore pro-Gaddafi, i.e. that in fact we were opposed to the Libyan peoples yearning for freedom. No matter how much we tried to explain our stance, somehow we were brought back to one and the same thing, that we are protecting Col Gaddafi. And yet, the AU PSC was the first organization to criticize the use of force against ordinary Libyans. All of these seem to have been deliberately forgotten. In what appears to be an attempt to vilify the African position, while the recent history of Gaddafi, and his associations, connections and links to major European capitals is being conveniently brushed under the carpet.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Having said all these, there are several interesting issues that the approach to Libya and the actions of NATO bring up, especially for those already established in academia, as well as our young minds gathered around here today. These include:

- In the world we inhabit, what needs to be done, and done better in order to create an axis of peace? That is States that are genuinely committed to tipping the scales of response away from military action to political dialogue;
- What kind of a world would we leave for our children, if narrow national interests are allowed to overtake a higher and nobler commitment to principle, and respect for the international rule of law;
- Is it feasible to speak of an African leadership collective, that can stand together even against powerful forces (our former colonisers) in order to ensure that we as Africans, indeed become the midwives of our own destiny;
- If inter-governmental institutions continue to serve interests, other than what they were founded for, what alternatives are there; and,
- Is there a progressive voice that is willing to mobilise for a better world, truly founded on the equality of nations?

In conclusion,

Libya will remain one the recent harsh reminders that indeed it is neither principles nor international law that matters in world politics, but the narrow national interests of those who have the best and the most sophisticated means of perpetuating violence, and who do not

hesitate to unleash them on anyone to further their objectives! The centuries old maxim of the ancient Greek historian Thucydides still applies: that the strong do as they wish, while the weak suffer what they must!

Libya, will serve as another recent reminder of how the AU, despite its best intentions to be at the centre of dealing with African challenges, continues to be deliberately side-lined.

In spite of all this, we remain firm on our values that embrace the spirit of internationalism; the rejection of colonialism and other forms of oppression; our quest for the unity and economic, political and social renewal of Africa; the promotion and defense of the plight of the suppressed masses and the poor of the world. We will never lower our voice when it comes to the structural inequalities and abuse of power by any structure in the global system – this is a virtue for which we are prepared to be criticized.

Ladies and Gentlemen, thank you for this opportunity, let us engage!