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**SPEECH BY FORMER PRESIDENT FW DE KLERK  
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### **MEDIATING THE IMPOSSIBLE**

The peaceful resolution of South Africa's long-standing racial imbroglio 24 years ago seemed to show that even the most intractable disputes could be solved peacefully by compromise and negotiation. Our experience gave new hope to the world that it might be possible to mediate the impossible and that other long-standing disputes might also be resolved through peaceful negotiations.

Since then the world has, by and large, been disappointed by the failure to replicate the success that we South Africans achieved:

- a negotiated solution to the Israeli/Palestinian conflict appears to be further away than ever;
- Russia continues to pursue its national goals while showing little interest in negotiating workable solutions to the situations in the Ukraine and the Crimea;
- in the absence of meaningful negotiations between its complex ethnic, religious and political factions, Syria continues to tear itself apart.

What then were the factors that enabled South Africa to achieve success and that continue to elude the search for peace in other parts of the world today?

First of all, I would like to deal with the reasons why we did not wish to enter negotiations on a one-man, one-vote process at an earlier stage. They included the following concerns:

- Nearly everywhere else in Africa decolonisation had led to chaos, military governments and economic collapse. By the mid-1980s there had already been more than 80 coups in the rest of the continent. We were worried about the prospect of one-man, one-vote, one-time.
- Afrikaners felt just as strongly about their right to self-determination as black South Africans did. They had twice defended it against the mightiest empire of the time in the first and second Anglo-Boer Wars. How would they be able to retain their right to rule themselves in a one-man, one-vote situation? How could the interests of minorities be protected?
- They were also worried about the influence of the South African Communist Party in the ANC. Throughout the 70s and the 80s virtually all the members of the ANC's National Executive Committee were also members of the SACP. Mkhonto we Sizwe, the armed wing of the ANC, was under the control of the SACP. As late as October 1987, our armed forces had been involved in large scale conflict with Soviet and



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Cuban-led forces in southern Angola. The Battle of the Lomba River in October 1987 was one of the biggest battles in Africa since the Second World War.

These concerns - which we thought were reasonable - received little or no sympathy from the international community.

Yet despite all this, within a few short years all the major parties had reached agreement on a new non-racial constitution - and 24 years ago on 10 May 1994 - President Mandela was inaugurated as the first President of South Africa's new constitutional democracy.

What were the factors that made this possible - and can other states experiencing conflict learn from them? I would like to mention the following:

- The first factor was the government's realisation that its policies stood no chance of achieving a lasting solution. The prospect of continued minority domination of the all the other peoples of South Africa was unjust and unworkable. The economy was becoming more integrated with each year that passed; whites did not constitute a majority in any part of the country; and the government's policies were vehemently rejected by a vast majority of blacks, Coloureds and Indians.
- A critically important factor was the acceptance by all sides that there could be neither a military nor a revolutionary victory - and that continuing conflict would simply turn South African into a wasteland. The security forces had accepted this reality by the early 80s. The ANC did so only after the 1986 state of emergency restored order in the country. Discreet contacts between the ANC and the government - originally initiated by Nelson Mandela while he was still in prison - enabled both sides to explore possibilities for negotiated solutions.
- Sanctions were, of course, also a factor. By the mid-80s our economy was increasingly isolated, and we had to deal with the crisis caused by the refusal of international banks in 1985 to roll over our short-term loans. Sanctions caused enormous distortions in the economy and probably cost us 1.5% growth per annum. Nevertheless, the economy actually grew at an annual rate of 2.7% between April 1986 and February 1989. Sanctions were often counter-productive. They increased opposition to foreign interference - and hobbled two of the greatest forces for change - economic growth and exposure to the world.
- Economic growth of the 60s and 70s was a major change factor. Between 1970 and 1994 the black share of personal disposable income increased from 29% to almost 50%. Millions of black South Africans moved to the cities and improved their standard of living and education. By 1989 the industrial and commercial sectors could no longer function without growing participation by black workers. Black South Africans were also beginning to play an increasingly indispensable role in the white-collar professions.



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- Between 1980 and 1994 the number of black children passing matric increased from 15 000 to more than 200 000. By 1994 there were more black South Africans at university than whites.
- Changes were also taking place in the Afrikaner community. In the decades following 1960 a whole generation of young Afrikaners moved from the working class to the middle class. They graduated from university and travelled abroad - and were inevitably influenced by global values. The new generation of university educated Afrikaners no longer shared the fiery nationalism of their parents and grandparents. By the early 80s they were becoming increasingly uncomfortable with many aspects of apartheid. By 1989 they were ripe for change.
- A further factor was the successful conclusion of a tripartite agreement in 1988 between South Africa, Cuba and Angola. This resulted in the withdrawal of 50 000 Cuban troops from Angola and the implementation of the United Nations' independence plan for Namibia - the territory that South Africa had ruled since 1915 under a League of Nations mandate. The negotiations with the Angolans and the Cubans and the subsequent successful implementation of the UN independence plan during 1989 reassured the government that it could secure its core interests through negotiations even with its most bitter opponents.
- The final - and critically important - factor for change was the collapse of global communism in 1989. At a stroke, it removed the government's primary strategic concern. The demise of international communism and the manifest success of the free market economies also meant that there was no longer any serious debate with regards to the economic policies that would be required to ensure economic growth in a future democratic South Africa.

These change factors opened the way to the transformation policies that I was able to implement after I became president in 1989. Our approach was based on the following realities:

- whether we liked one another or not, there could be no long-term solution that did not involve all the major parties and population groups of our country;
- our problems could be solved only through negotiation - any attempt by any party to continue to impose its will on its opponents by force would simply lead to the destruction of the country and the economy;
- a successful outcome to our negotiations would often require genuine concessions and painful compromises by all parties;
- we would have to put the bitterness of the past behind us and search for genuine national reconciliation;
- we needed a strong Constitution that would provide the basic rules for our new society; that would guarantee the rights and security of all our individuals and communities.



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These factors helped us to begin our search for a peaceful solution. However, we would not have progressed very far without the following key requirements:

There had to be a genuine commitment to a negotiated solution by all the main parties. The balance of forces had to be such that no party could successfully impose its will on the others. Perceptions of relative power - and projections of future shifts in the balance of power - were crucial. Such perceptions often determined the demands and concessions that parties would be prepared to make at the negotiating table.

Timing was crucial. Had we started our negotiation initiative earlier - say, in the middle 70s - it is doubtful that it would have been able to take our followers with us. If we had launched our initiative too late, we might have entered the negotiation process when the balance of power had begun to shift against us - as Ian Smith did in Zimbabwe. History sometimes opens a window of opportunity, when all the forces involved are ripe for negotiation. It is the task of statesmen to recognise such windows and lead their followers through, before history once again slams them shut.

Inclusivity. One of the major problems that we encountered were the boycotts of the talks that were initiated first by the ANC and then by the Zulu-based Inkatha Freedom Party and white right wing parties. It was essential to persuade all the major parties to rejoin the process before the elections. This we ultimately managed to do with only eight days to spare!

Leadership. It was equally important for parties to be able to take their constituencies with them. Strong and determined leadership was essential.

Personalities also played an important role. The main role players from the negotiating parties had to be able to develop personal relationships based on mutual trust and confidence. They also had to develop a strong sense of patience and the fortitude to deal with the frequent frustrations and obstacles. Nelson Mandela and I had such a relationship - despite the stormy altercations that inevitably arise between political opponents.

We were also fortunate to have the moral influence of Archbishop Desmond Tutu. Although he was not directly involved in the negotiations, he often played the role of a moral referee - and spoke out volubly against violence from any quarter.

Risk. Ultimately, the negotiators had to be prepared to take risks to assure a successful outcome. Few agreements will ever be absolutely watertight and at some juncture a leap of faith will usually be unavoidable.

Dealing with extremists. Throughout the process there were extremists on the right and left who wanted to derail negotiations by initiating violence. It was critically important not to give such elements the power to stop the peace process.



Win/win outcomes. Ultimately the success of our negotiations depended on the ability of the negotiators to address the reasonable interests and concerns of all parties. One-sided solutions seldom last and simply make the eventual resumption of genuine negotiations more difficult.

So how can our experience be helpful in ‘mediating the impossible’ in the world’s continuing conflicts?

- Military intervention provides no solutions. International interventions in Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya and Syria have had catastrophic consequences for the peoples of these countries.
- A deep understanding of the histories and peoples of the countries involved in conflict is essential. Do not invade countries with 10 000 years of history and with intricately complex societies that you do not understand.
- Beware of asymmetric power relations. Leaders who believe that they are overwhelmingly powerful will not make the concessions to weaker negotiating partners that successful negotiations will always require.
- Beware of political or religious ideologies. It is very difficult to negotiate with fanatics. This includes your own ideologies. Do not try to recast distant and complex societies in your own image.
- Beware of the past. Negotiating parties often find it quite easy to agree about the future since most people want the same things - peace, prosperity and progress. However, differences about the past often create insurmountable barriers.
- Do not allow extremists on any side to sabotage peace processes.
- All parties that can influence the outcome of conflicts must be included in the negotiations - even those that you like the least.
- Sanctions will not influence the behaviour of parties that are convinced that they are confronted by existential threats. Economic growth and extensive engagement are often much more effective than ostracism.
- Accept the reasonable concerns of all parties - including those that you like the least. Why should a powerful dictator enter into negotiations if he believes that the outcome will result in his death or disgrace?
- Once agreements have been reached, the international community should help to ensure that they are faithfully implemented by all parties.

We must also examine the roots of the conflicts that continue to afflict countries throughout the world. They lie in the inability to manage diversity. The simple reality is that in the 21st century, the main threat to peace no longer comes from wars between countries: it comes from the growing threat of conflict within countries between ethnic, cultural and religious communities.

Examples include the recent civil war in Sri Lanka between Tamils and Sri Lankans; the ongoing tensions between Israelis and Palestinians; conflicts involving the Kurdish minorities in Turkey, Syria, Iraq and Iran; continuing ethnic warfare in South Sudan and Darfur; recent conflicts in the Ivory Coast and Mali; recurrent tensions between Moslems and Christians in



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Nigeria. Chechnya, Dagestan, Georgia, Kashmir and the Philippines have recently - or are still - experiencing ethnic or religious conflicts. The current civil war in Syria is being seriously exacerbated by long-standing tensions between fundamentalists, Shi'ites, Alawites, Kurds and Christians.

As we in South Africa have discovered, the answer to diversity is not secession, partition and devising ways to enable communities to live apart. It is to adopt approaches and to establish norms that will enable different cultural, ethnic and religious communities to live together peacefully and in mutual respect within the same states. To achieve this, we must reach broad agreement on the cultural, linguistic and educational rights that such communities should enjoy.

If we wish to succeed in our attempts to “mediate the impossible” we need to adopt better and stronger international conventions to define and protect the rights of cultural, ethnic and religious minorities throughout the world:

- We need to establish an international norm for these rights, just as we have already done for individuals, for women and for children.
- We need to create space in which communities will be able to preserve their religious, cultural and language diversity within a framework of overarching common values based on toleration and respect for all fundamental rights.
- We need to measure the behaviour of governments against these norms. If we do so, I am confident that we will soon discover that the societies that are the worst afflicted by inter-communal violence are also those that have the least respect for the rights of their constituent communities.

Perhaps the main lesson that we South Africans have learned from our democratic transition is that the process never ends. It is not possible to rest on one's laurels and imagine that one has ever solved all one's problems. It is just as important to entrench constitutional values as it is to reach agreement on them. Our new Constitution was not an end in itself, but a framework within which we all must continue our search for a much fairer and a much more equal society.

Unfortunately, many of the agreements that we negotiated in the early 1990s are now under pressure. Perhaps our greatest challenge as South Africans will be to continue to show that even the most intractable problems can be resolved peacefully - not just for 24 years - but for the indefinite future.

We have learned that the success of all our communities is dependent on our willingness to accommodate one another's reasonable concerns and interests. And we have learned that the process never ends.

We hope that our experience will continue to help other peacemakers who have set out to mediate the impossible.