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F W DE KLERK ADDRESSES THE PERES CENTRE FOR PEACE - PEACE TEAM ON WHAT RECONCILIATION DURING THE PAST TWENTY YEARS HAS TAUGHT SOUTH AFRICA

At a time of general deadlock and despondency in the Middle-East, the Peres Centre for Peace has brought a mixed team of young Palestinian and Israeli soccer players to South Africa to participate in the Football for Hope Festival which will be held in Alexandra, Johannesburg during the last week of the Soccer World Cup. Last night, FW de Klerk made the following remarks to the participants regarding South Africa's experience of reconciliation during the past 20 years.

F W d Klerk said that historians would regard the beginning of February 1990 as the watershed of South Africa's modern history. His speech to parliament of 2 February 1990 and Nelson Mandela's release from prison nine days later changed South Africa forever.

During the 'eighties South Africa had been caught in a downward spiral of violence and conflict. "We were in the grip of growing isolation. Our diplomats were unwelcome; our businessmen had to spend much of their time circumventing sanctions; our sportsmen - including our rugby and cricket players - had been barred from international competition; our young men were spending months every year fighting difficult border wars or patrolling black townships where the animosity and resentment were almost palpable."

Even after we had committed ourselves to transformation, few experts were optimistic about our chances for success. "If one had asked them, in February 1990, to consider scenarios for the future, most of them would have regarded the scenario that has actually unfolded in the past twenty years as being hopelessly and unrealistically optimistic." They would immediately have drawn attention to some of the apparently irresolvable problems - including enormous ideological differences and historic bitterness; the long-standing enmity between the ANC, the NP and the IFP; and fears that the ANC would adopt populist policies and wreak revenge on whites.

De Klerk pointed out that the experts were wrong: South Africans had been able to bridge the historic chasm that divided them. They realized that

- 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 - that 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.

- we would have to put the bitterness of the past behind us and that we would have to 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.

“Peace-making is never easy. It always involves risk. It often requires painful concessions. It means that we have to speak to people who have been our enemies”.

De Klerk then listed the enormous dividends that South Africa had earned by making peace. He pointed to South Africa’s vibrant non-racial constitutional democracy; its effective Bill of Rights and independent courts; its free and vigorous national debate; seventeen years of uninterrupted economic growth - until the global economic downturn in 2008; and the resumption of its position as a respected and influential member of the international community.

“Our international success is perhaps best symbolised by the current World Cup. Many sceptics doubted that an African country would be able to stage the world’s most popular sporting event. They did not believe that we would be able to build the new stadiums and infrastructure that were needed to host the event. They said that visitors would be kept away by crime: and that everything would be chaotic. Once again, they were wrong”.

De Klerk then listed the many problems that South Africa still experiences, including inequality, poverty, unemployment, crime and the failure of the education system. He said that “these are enormous problems - but to a greater or lesser extent they are the kind of problems that confront many societies. We are addressing them and we are making progress. By contrast, the problems that confronted us in the 1980’s did not seem to have a solution.”

None of the progress that South Africa had made would have been possible had we not taken the decision to embark on the difficult road to peace and reconciliation twenty years ago.

These developments - and the historic events of 1989 in Eastern Europe - illustrated how unpredictable the flow of human history is. They also underline important truths that none of us should forget: “no situation in human affairs is ever hopeless; we can control our destinies and can build better futures; even the most difficult conflicts can be resolved peacefully; nothing is impossible.”