

27/04/1999

Rainbow Nation turns five

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TODAY, April 27 1999, the Rainbow Nation will be celebrating its fifth birthday as a free country. This anniversary also marks the end of the first term of a democratically elected, non-racial, non-sexist Government in the history of our country.

The period between 1994-1999, will probably go down as one of the most interesting in the history of our country.

Generally dubbed as being the transitional period. The five year period was preceded by five years of tough negotiations which gave birth to what the world now calls, "The Miracle". To peace-loving and forward-looking South Africans, there was nothing miraculous about it. South Africans merely wished to live the words of the Freedom Charter (1956) which said that, "South Africa belongs to all who live in it".

It is very important to stress that what has been achieved by South Africa in the last five years has been the result of the hard work of its people and the valuable contribution of countries who are friends of South Africa, its people and Government.

Malaysia, for one, deserves a special mention in the international effort to create a better life for all South Africans.

Malaysia's efforts and commitment to the the reconstruction, development and wealth creation in South Africa are most evident in the high level of Malaysia's investments in the country. In just 3 years (1994-1997), Malaysia, a developing country, became the 2nd biggest investor in South Africa, with over RM4 billion in investments. These much needed injections of capital were mainly in the telecommunications, petro-chemicals, property development, hotel, financial services and food processing sectors of the economy.

Over the same period, trade between the two countries also enjoyed an unprecedented boom.

These close economic relations have been encouraged and complimented by warm political ties. The highlight for this office in this regard was President Nelson Mandela's state visit to Malaysia in early March 1997. Apart from marking the first ever state visit by a South African leader of state to Malaysia, the visit also consolidated and secured the bilateral gains, which had been made by the two countries, through the signing of a bilateral agreement on trade and shipping.

During his visit, President Mandela was accompanied by over 90 South African captains of business who participated in the Second Malaysia-South Africa Business Forum. The harvest from that forum is currently being profitably reaped by the business communities of both countries.

The Malaysian Government's full commitment to the New South Africa was most evident in the early stages of our country's life, when Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad became one of the very first leaders to visit South Africa in 1995. As the guest of honour in the First South Africa-Malaysia Business Forum, Dr Mahathir's presence sealed Malaysia's dedication to the reconstruction and development of South Africa.

Since then, Dr Mahathir has visited the Rainbow Nation four times. On one of these visits, he was conferred the Order of Good Hope - South Africa's highest accolade - for his leadership, vision and undaunted commitment to the New South Africa.

Another recent and major highlight in the relationship between the two

countries, was Deputy President Thabo Mbeki's working visit in September 1998. Apart from further strengthening our political and economic relations, the visit also took our bilateral ties to a new plane; multi-lateral cooperation through strategic bilateral ties. In brief, Mbeki in his address to the Third Malaysia-South Africa Business Forum in Kuala Lumpur, stated that Malaysia together with South Africa, as one of the leaders in the South, should jointly champion the cause of developing nations.

Since then, the two countries have seen a number of ministerial, provincial (state level), local government, business and sector interest delegations between them.

South Africa has participated in a number of events hosted by Malaysia in the fields of the arts, culture, science, technology, sports, and the environment. Most memorable of these were the 34 medals that South Africa won during the sixteenth Commonwealth Games held in Kuala Lumpur in 1998. There were significant developments in export promotion and business development programmes in South Africa.

A review on trade and investment activities over the past five years revealed that:

* The Government's drive to attract fixed direct investments has been gaining momentum.

Starting at 4.7 billion rand (RM1 = 1.57 rand) in 1994, it reached 11.66 billion in 1997. The 1998 figures could reach 7.246 billion.

* The incentive schemes aimed at encouraging investments are also bearing fruit. Under the Tax Holiday Scheme, in 1998 alone, approvals were granted to 86 local and foreign companies. These investments of 2.6 billion rand have the potential to create 7,200 jobs. Since its inception, the scheme has garnered 3.6 billion rand in investments with a potential for creating about 11,000 jobs from 129 approved projects.

* The Small-Medium Manufacturing Development Programme, aimed at encouraging investment in manufacturing by small businesses, has made tremendous strides since it started operations in July 1997.

Last year alone, this programme approved 666 projects with a total investment of 1.6 billion rand and the potential to create 21,000 jobs. Reflecting upon the changes that South Africa's relations with the international community has undergone since 1994, it is with pride that we note the fact that we have established diplomatic relations with 164 countries and joined over 70 international organisations since the previous elections.

Pretoria, the capital, has become one of the world's busiest diplomatic capitals with 124 countries represented there. In addition, the country's chairmanship of the Southern African Development Community (SADC) and the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), has entrusted South Africa with special responsibilities. The Government was also regularly consulted by all the major players in the international community on developments around the world.

Our chairmanship of the SADC and NAM has entrusted us with special responsibilities and in this role we are considered to be a significant spokesperson for the interests and concerns of the developing world.

In November 1999, Durban will be hosting the Commonwealth Heads of Government Summit.

Health care has improved. Three new hospitals with 1088 doctors started their community service this year. Work has also commenced on the rehabilitation of hospitals for which 100 million rand has been allocated. In addition, the first ever comprehensive Demographic and Health Survey in the history of the country was conducted last year and 68 new clinics were built with 14 others being upgraded.

South Africa has moved up from being the 55th most popular tourist destination in the world to being the 25th in 1998.

- * South Africa has emerged as Africa's leading tourist destination.

- * The country is one of seven countries that have experienced a tourism growth rate of 10 per cent and more.

- * Tourism in the past three years has created close to a million new jobs.

South Africa has also made great strides in improving social services and raising the standard of living of its people:

In 1994, some 30 per cent of South Africans lacked access to clean water. This figure had been cut down to 20 per cent after 3 million people gained access to this primary necessity.

- * In 1994, only 40 per cent of households had electricity. Now, after more than 2 million houses were connected, 63 per cent have electricity.

- * In 1994, a quarter of the houses had telephones. 1.3 million phones were then installed and now 35 per cent of all homes have their own telephones.

- * Over 5 million children are fed under the Primary School Nutrition Scheme and millions are healthier because of free health care.

- * With 700,000 houses already built or under construction, we will not be able to reach our target of 1 million homes for this year. However, 15,000 houses are now being built each month.

- * Ten thousand new classrooms have already been built.

- * A welfare savings rate of 350 million rand a year through increased efficiency and the combating of fraud has meant that old-age pensions and disability grants will increase this year by 4 per cent.

The Presidential Jobs Summit which involved the Government, businesses, labour force and the South African communities in general was held last year. The summit adopted a programme to boost job creation.

- * The trade union movement is mobilising working people to give a day's pay to projects which will help create jobs. Ministers and deputy ministers will all contribute a day's salary to this programme and all other wage earners are urged to follow suit.

- * The business community is mobilising 1 billion rand in funds for projects involving tourism and skills development in order to create jobs.

- * The Government's 5 billion rand package of labour-intensive infrastructure programmes will expand dramatically over the next few years.

- * The Umsobomvu Trust, set up with a levy on the demutualisation of life assurance funds and worth over a billion rand will help create jobs, scholarships and business opportunities for the youth of South Africa.

On the morning of June 2 1999, South Africa for the second time in its history, will be going to the polls to democratically elect the men and women who will lead the country into the next millennium.

Thus far, over 80 per cent of the projected 23 million voters have been registered. The independent electoral commission has laid the necessary infrastructure that is vital in ensuring a free and fair elections. The various political parties, which give vibrancy to the political landscape in South Africa, have already published their manifestos. They will soon earnestly take to the campaign trail in order to woo the electorate and fight for the 490 seats in Parliament. As the country gradually matures in democracy, this process is expected to run smoothly and to usher in new leaders in what has been termed the "Post-Mandela Era".

With the quality of leadership and economically active and socially responsible citizenry, the gains that have been secured by the Government led by President Nelson Mandela will be consolidated and further advanced by the incoming leadership.

The leading party in the ruling coalition is expected to continue its investor friendly policies aimed at creating jobs and generating economic growth to underpin the political gains clinched during the 1994 election. More and more of the previously marginalised communities will be brought into the mainstream of the economy through sensible job creation schemes and entrepreneur development programmes initiated by the Government. As expected, South Africa will continue to play a vital role in the global arena.

With the end of its first term in office, the African National Congress led Government is most aware of the major contribution that has been made by Malaysia in the broader effort to create a better life for all South Africans and will continue to value its relations with Malaysia highly.

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