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LETTER FROM THE PRESIDENT: Thabo Mbeki

MDGs - defences against the tsunami of world poverty

Three days before the publication of this edition of ANC Today, the 62nd General Assembly of the United Nations (UNGA) convened at the UN Headquarters in New York.

This year the UNGA will pay particular attention to the important issue of climate change.

Seven years ago, in 2000, in its Millennium Summit, the UNGA addressed the challenge of global poverty. As part of its Millennium Declaration, it identified various Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) that had to be achieved by 2015. Effectively this year's UNGA is the half-way point on the journey towards the realisation of the MDGs.

The UNGA will therefore have to pose the critical questions - what progress has been made towards the achievement of the MDGs, and what more should be done to ensure that the world community of nations realises this objective? Correct and honest answers to these questions are of vital importance to the billions across the globe who continue to suffer from the terrible scourges of poverty, hunger and underdevelopment.

When it was adopted in 2000, the Millennium Declaration brought great hope to these masses. It communicated the message that the international community, combining both developed and developing countries, had, at last, resolved to make poverty history, everywhere in the world.

In moving words, the Millennium Declaration said: "We believe that the central challenge we face today is to ensure that globalisation becomes a positive force for all the world's people. For while globalisation offers great opportunities, at present its benefits are very unevenly shared, while its costs are unevenly distributed. We recognise that developing countries and countries with economies in transition face special difficulties in responding to this central challenge.

"Thus, only through broad and sustained efforts to create a shared future, based upon our common humanity in all its diversity, can globalisation be made fully inclusive and equitable. These efforts must include policies and measures, at the global level, which correspond to the needs of developing countries and economies in transition and are formulated and implemented with their effective participation.

"We will spare no effort to free our fellow men, women and children from the abject and dehumanising conditions of extreme poverty, to which more than a billion of them are currently subjected. We are committed to making the right to development a reality for everyone and to freeing the entire human race from want.

"We resolve therefore to create an environment - at the national and global levels alike - which is conducive to development and to the elimination of poverty."

## Special needs of the African continent

Of great importance to us as Africans, the Millennium Declaration made it a point specifically to recognise and acknowledge the special needs of the African continent.

In this regard it said: "We will support the consolidation of democracy in Africa and assist Africans in their struggle for lasting peace, poverty eradication and sustainable development, thereby bringing Africa into the mainstream of the world economy.

"We resolve therefore:

- \* To give full support to the political and institutional structures of emerging democracies in Africa;
- \* To encourage and sustain regional and subregional mechanisms for preventing conflict and promoting political stability, and to ensure a reliable flow of resources for peacekeeping operations on the continent;
- \* To take special measures to address the challenges of poverty eradication and sustainable development in Africa, including debt cancellation, improved market access, enhanced Official Development Assistance and increased flows of Foreign Direct Investment, as well as transfers of technology;
- \* To help Africa build up its capacity to tackle the spread of the HIV/AIDS pandemic and other infectious diseases."

These pledges were fully in keeping with the objectives set by the African Union and its development programme, NEPAD. We therefore welcomed them as a firm signal that the peoples of the world were fully committed to walk the long and hard road to Africa's renewal, side by side with us. This commitment was further confirmed when the UNGA adopted a resolution formally to support NEPAD, which has been followed by practical steps to give effect to this resolution.

However, it is commonly agreed that during the remaining period to 2015, the second half of the period the UNGA had set for the achievement of the MDGs, a lot more will have to be done than was the case during the first half. In reality, therefore, the 2007 UNGA will have to make the honest admission that the world community of nations has so far not lived up to the solemn undertakings it made to the poor in Africa and the rest of the world.

To give a better sense of the challenge ahead of us, we would like to refer to an assessment made by the UN Economic Commission for Africa (ECA) about how many and which African countries are likely to achieve seven of the MDGs.

With regard to MDG 1, to halve extreme poverty and hunger by 2015, the ECA says only 13 African countries are likely to reduce poverty to the required degree, and:

MDG 2, to achieve universal primary education, only 14 countries are likely to succeed;

MDG 3, to promote gender equality and promote women, only 7 countries are likely to achieve gender parity at the level of secondary school education;

MDG 4, to reduce child mortality, only 8 countries are likely to achieve this goal;

MDG 5, to reduce the maternal mortality rate, only 9 countries are likely to achieve this goal;

MDG 6, to combat HIV and AIDS, malaria and other diseases, only 8 countries are likely to meet the HIV and AIDS reduction targets, and with regard to malaria, 13;

MDG 7, to ensure environmental sustainability, only 11 countries are likely to meet the water requirements in the rural areas, and only 7 are likely to meet the urban sanitation requirements;

MDG 8 targets the development of a global partnership for development.

Thus the ECA tells the dismal and distressing story that the overwhelming majority of countries on our continent will, for the foreseeable future, remain mired in a deeply dehumanising condition of poverty, misery and underdevelopment.

Diplomatic formulations and polite terminology

The 2005 Human Development Report (HDR) of the UNDP addressed the global failure to meet the MDGs with a passionate honesty to which we and all people of conscience must respond. The HDR said:

"As governments prepare for the 2005 UN summit, the overall report card on progress makes for depressing reading. Most countries are off track for most of the MDGs. Human development is faltering in some key areas, and already deep inequalities are widening.

"Various diplomatic formulations and polite terminology can be found to describe the divergence between progress on human development and the ambition set out in the Millennium Declaration.

"None of them should be allowed to obscure a simple truth: the promise to the world's poor is being broken. This year, 2005, marks a crossroads. The world's governments face a choice. One option is to seize the moment and make 2005 the start of a 'decade for development'. If the investments and the policies needed to achieve the MDGs are put in place today, there is still time to deliver on the promise of the Millennium Declaration. But time is running out.

"The UN summit provides a critical opportunity to adopt the bold action plans needed not just to get back on track for the 2015 goals, but to overcome the deep inequalities that divide humanity and to forge a new, more just pattern of globalisation. The other option is to continue on a business as usual basis and make 2005 the year in which the pledge of the Millennium Declaration is broken. This is a choice that will result in the current generation of

political leaders going down in history as the leaders that let the MDGs fail on their watch.

"Instead of delivering action, the UN summit could deliver another round of high-sounding declarations, with rich countries offering more words and no action.

Such an outcome will have obvious consequences for the world's poor. But in a world of increasingly interconnected threats and opportunities, it will also jeopardise global security, peace and prosperity.

"The 2005 summit provides a critical opportunity for the governments that signed the Millennium Declaration to show that they mean business - and that they are capable of breaking with 'business as usual'. This is the moment to prove that the Millennium Declaration is not just a paper promise, but a commitment to change.

"The summit is the moment to mobilise the investment resources and develop the plans needed to build the defences that can stop the tsunami of world poverty. What is needed is the political will to act on the vision that governments set out five years ago."

Keeping our promise to the poor

Responding to the needs of our people, and seeking to honour the commitment we made when we also subscribed to the Millennium Declaration, we have also set ourselves target dates for the achievement of the MDGs.

For instance, among others, we have committed ourselves:

- \* to halve unemployment and poverty by 2014;
- \* to ensure universal access to clean water by 2008;
- \* to ensure universal access to sanitation by 2010; and,
- \* to ensure universal access to electricity by 2012.

We made these and other solemn commitments to the masses of our people as a token of our determination to honour our movement's obligation to work selflessly for the upliftment of these masses. We must ensure that we do not open ourselves to the accusation by these masses that we have broken our promise to the poor.

We have made the point many times before that our country has two inter-linked economies, the First and the Second. This domestic economic apartheid mirrors the global economic apartheid between the developed North and the developing South.

To honour our promise to the poor of our country, the first strategic decision we took is that we must use the strength of the developed First Economy to generate the resources we need to uplift the millions trapped in the Second Economy.

The second strategic decision we took was that we could not leave this to the market.

The democratic state had to intervene as a developmental state, centrally to ensure that the Second Economy accesses the various resources generated by and located within the First Economy. This

imposed the obligation on us to achieve two strategic objectives. These are:

- \* continuously to strengthen, expand, modernise and dynamise the First Economy to ensure that it generates the wealth we need to attend to the demands of the millions of our people caught within the Second Economy; and,

- \* continuously to strengthen the democratic state, enhance its capacity as an instrument for progressive change, and entrench its legitimacy in the minds of our people as a genuine people's agency for reconstruction and development and the eradication of poverty and underdevelopment.

We have registered important victories with regard to both these strategic objectives. However, they must, at all times, remain an important part of our work in progress. We must therefore always be ready to oppose and defeat all attempts to undermine our efforts to achieve these strategic objectives.

Our failure in this regard would mean that we dishonour our promise to the poor in our country, and betray the targets we have set ourselves with regard to the MDGs.

Thus would history also condemn us as a 'generation of political leaders that let the MDGs fail on their watch'.

Vol 4 of ANC Today in 2004, published a series discussing the global challenge of development. The last article in the series (Vol 4 No 48), contained the two following paragraphs:

"Global poverty constitutes one of the greatest challenges facing humanity. To confront it will require the development of a strong world movement mobilised to oblige 'the governments (of the developed countries), the multilateral organisations, and international NGOs - the actors who have the power to change the norms and rules of the world economy - to establish as an overarching priority a more equal world economic distribution, and not just, as now, fewer people in poverty'...

"The rich world will need to remember that it cannot reason with a hungry belly; it has no ears! It will need to beware of the natives, whose only possession is hungry bellies without ears! In the era of globalisation, no country is an island."

As that article and the others in the series argued, driven by its strategic objective to defeat the Soviet Union after WWII, the United States used the strength of its economy and the interventions of the US government to guarantee the development of Western Europe, Japan, South Korea and Taiwan.

Similarly, for their own strategic reasons, the most powerful countries in Western Europe have done the same thing to ensure the development of various European countries, within the context of the European Union.

However, the response of the developed countries of the North to the MDGs and the needs of the billions of poor people in Africa and the rest of the South, which the

2005 UNDP HDR denounced in undiplomatic language, suggests that these countries see no strategic threat to themselves in the failure to achieve the MDGs.

But we, for our part, know that our democracy cannot survive, and our efforts to create a non-racial, non-sexist and people-centred society would fail, if we do not achieve the MDGs, bearing in mind the time frames we have set ourselves. We will not resort to diplomatic formulations and polite terminology as our country's defence against the tsunami of poverty within the new South Africa we are striving to build.