

Keynote Address by President Jacob Zuma on the occasion of the launch of the Gallows Museum at the Pretoria Central Correctional Centre

The families of political prisoners who were executed in Pretoria,
Minister Nosiviwe Mapisa-Nqakula and all Ministers and Premiers present,
Deputy Ministers and Mayors,
Leaders of our political parties and Honourable Members of Parliament;
Esteemed members of the Judiciary,
Traditional leaders and religious leaders,
Comrades, Friends and Fellow South Africans,

On the 27th of April 1994, all South Africans cast their votes together for the first time.

The exercise symbolised the burying of the past, and a new beginning.

However, that new beginning cannot be fully complete until we come to terms with some aspects of our painful past. Today is one such day.

The dismantling of the gallows here at C Max Correctional Centre, Pretoria in 1996 robbed people of an opportunity to know and understand the painful history of the executions that were carried out by the apartheid state.

Today, in this historic ceremony, we are reopening the restored gallows which are now a museum.

In total the number of people who were hanged is about 4000. Of those 134 were political prisoners, and it is this 134 that we are honouring today.

Most of the political prisoners were executed at the prime of their lives, averaging the ages of 20 and 45.

The youngest was from the Vulindlela family, where a family of five were executed, the youngest member being 18 years old.

The first people to be executed for political reasons on 5 September 1961 were Thompson Chamane, Joe Mlangeni Khuzwayo, Maqadini Lushozi, Mahemu Goqo, Brian Ganozi Mgumbungu, Schoolboy Mthembu and Payiyana Dladla.

The executions followed a clash that erupted in Cator Manor Township outside Durban in January 1960 during the beerhall riots.

The last person to be hanged was Jeffrey Boesman Mangena on 29 September 1989. At that late hour, when the apartheid state was almost on its knees, executions were still being carried out.

The 134 men were terrorists or trouble makers to the authorities then.

But to their people and families, they were freedom fighters who wanted to see a free, democratic and non-sexist South Africa.

They had their own unique personalities and contributions.

From those who were the first MK cadres to be hanged for MK operations we recall Vuyisile Mini, Zinakile Mkaba and Wilson Khayingo who were executed on 6 November 1964 and Nolali Mpentse, Daniel Ndongeni and Samuel Jonas who followed them to the gallows on 23 February 1965.

Vuyisile Mini always stood out, as he was a well known singer and composer of great pedigree.

He took the struggle for liberation to the choirs he sang in.

During the Defiance Campaign he composed songs that inspired other volunteers. Amongst these is the song "Mayihambe levangeli, Mayigqib' ilizwe linke" (let this gospel spread and be known worldwide).

Mini, Mkaba and Khayingo went to the gallows singing freedom songs that Comrade Mini had composed. They displayed great courage and strength in the face of adversity.

Sadly, Vuyisile Mini's daughter Nomkhosi also lost her life in the hands of the apartheid state, having followed in the footsteps of her father to not rest until South Africa was free.

During the late 70s and 80s the state executed young freedom fighters Solomon Mahlangu and Andrew Zondo and others, who continue to inspire many young people today to make South Africa a better country.

While most were ANC prisoners, the Pan Africanist Congress also lost a number of its cadres, such as Dumisa Dambalaza, Richard Motsohae, Josiah Mocumi, Thomas Molatlhegi and Petrus Matshobe.

John Harris is the only white person who was sentenced to death and executed for political offences in 1965.

Today, all 134 names are officially being enshrined for eternity so that future generations will know what this country went through, so that we never go through a similar horror ever again.

Compatriots,

On this day we also acknowledge the pain of families whose loved ones were victims of the actions of some of the political prisoners we are remembering today.

In any war there are casualties. Today we remember all of them to, as we know that it cuts both ways.

Compatriots

We also spare a thought for people who had been sentenced to death when freedom dawned. They have experienced the pain of waiting to be called to walk the 52 steps to the gallows. They live with the trauma and pain of a life that was nearly lost.

I also specifically want to mention the prison warders who worked on death row, many of who were recruited to work here at the tender ages of fifteen and sixteen.

We could regard them as the representatives or remnants of a cruel system that brought pain to us all. Their common story can be summed up by what one former warder in the United States, Donald Cabana once wrote.

He said: "there is a part of the warder that dies with his prisoner. Nobody else can suffer the intimacy of impending death, or experience the pitiable helplessness involved, in the same way as the warder and his condemned prisoner."

He goes further to say that "both (the warder and the prisoner), are victims, unwilling captives of a human tragedy that is presented on a stage shrouded by mystery."

As part of our long path to healing, and in the understanding that we need to walk that

path together, government is assisting these officers and others who worked at the gallows, to come to terms with what exactly happened here at the then Pretoria Central Prison.

They may have been brainwashed into believing that the death row prisoners deserved to die.

Or they were just clinically doing their jobs and had shut down the emotions involved with the official duty of executing people or looking after people who were waiting to be executed. Either way, they need healing too.

I am happy that some of them, who are still in the employ of the department, have been willing to share their stories as that is part of the healing process. These warders are the only ones who know what exactly happened inside the apartheid killing room.

Compatriots,

We must remember that what happened in this prison is a microcosm of the police state we once lived in, where people's freedom was never guaranteed.

One minute one would be free and soon after, one would be in prison or be brutally murdered by functionaries of the apartheid state.

There are many examples of a cruel abuse of power to keep people in jail. A case in point is the situation of PAC President, Robert Sobukwe. When he had served his sentence, a Sobukwe Clause was instituted in order to keep him in prison for another six years.

The power of the apartheid security apparatus was felt more by the political detainees who were tortured or murdered.

It is reported that between 1960 and 1969, twenty detainees died in detention.

We recall the first death in detention, that of Looksmart Solwandle Ngudle in September 1963. The police said he killed himself, which became a trend for all deaths in detention.

There are other high profile deaths in apartheid prisons in the face of extreme brutality, such as that of Braam Fischer, Stephen Bantu Biko, Neil Aggett, Ahmed Timol and others who made an immense contribution to our history and freedom.

As part of our liberation heritage and history, we are still going to formally acknowledge all these patriots who lost their lives in apartheid jails.

Indeed our freedom was not free. It came at a huge price, and at great pain.

Compatriots,

Given the pain South Africa experienced, it should not be surprising that in the democratic state, through a most progressive constitution, the death penalty was outlawed.

The right to life and dignity are the most important of all human rights in our country.

The South African State does not need to kill people to show that killing people or committing serious crimes is wrong.

This does not mean that we view serious crimes as not warranting serious punishment. We believe we can be equally tough without giving the State the licence to kill.

We know that when experiencing violent crime, some South Africans entertain the death penalty debate.

It has never been proven that the death sentence is more effective than correctional methods in deterring or preventing crime.

In fact, the steady decline in the murder rate which has, for the first time ever, dropped below 16 000 cases, demonstrates that our new methods of fighting crime are effective.

The police will continue using effective methods to rid our communities of crime and make South Africans feel and be safer.

Compatriots,

Our struggle for freedom was fought on many pillars, including the international pillar.

We therefore appreciate the role that the international community played, adding their voices of condemnation of what was happening at the gallows here in Pretoria.

Many campaigns rallied support for patriots such as Vuyisile Mini, Solomon Mahlangu and Jeffrey Boesman Mangena amongst others.

Fellow South Africans and affected families,

All South Africans suffered for this freedom. Lives were lost and many families went through untold pain and suffering.

We therefore open this museum as a place of healing. We are opening it so that future generations can learn how things can go wrong if we lose our common humanness and shared nationhood, when we lose that sense of respecting each other as human beings.

This museum must be a symbol, not of the past, but of the hope we have for our future.

Together with other monuments, such as the Robben Island, the Nelson Mandela, and the Apartheid Museums, this place will forever be embedded in our history and heritage.

There are many more that we should still build as we create a liberation heritage route that gives a true account of where we come from, as a people.

On this special, emotional day that challenges our sense of forgiveness and healing, we remember young Solomon Mahlangu's last words, that his blood would nourish the tree of freedom.

Let his blood and that of all the patriots who fell here, inspire us to build a better South Africa that upholds human dignity and the right to life.

We invite South Africans to make time and visit the museum when it opens to the public next year.

Compatriots,

Let me extend our heartfelt gratitude to the families who are with us today. We can never really feel the pain as deeply as you do. We hope this occasion contributes to the healing process and closure.

May the spirits of your loved ones now rest in peace, for you have walked the steps that they walked on their last journey.

I thank you.