

SPEECH NOTES FOR KZN TRANSPORT, COMMUNITY SAFETY & LIAISON MEC WILLIES MCHUNU AT THE 1860 COMMEMORATION STAKEHOLDERS MEETING HELD ON SATURDAY 28TH AUGUST IN DURBAN.

Protocol Observed.

The Honourable Premier of KwaZulu-Natal pronounced during his State of the Province address on the 24th of February 2010 that the Province of KwaZulu-Natal will join “the rest of South Africa in commemorating the 150 years of the arrival of the Indian indentured labourers, the ancestral origin of the large community that added to the tapestry of our Rainbow Nation.”

Hence, we are gathered here today in this meeting of all stakeholders in KwaZulu-Natal to deliver on the Premier’s undertaking. It therefore gives me great pleasure and honour to be part of this important meeting which is a build up to the celebration and commemoration of the 150 years of the arrival of Indians in South Africa.

The purpose of this meeting is twofold, namely:

- To communicate to all interested parties government’s programme of action with respect to the commemoration;
- To encourage communities/civil society and municipalities to host their programmes of action with respect to the commemoration independent of provincial government intervention and support.

We thank the Office of the Premier and the Department of Arts and Culture which sent invites so that we are able to gather here today in this meeting which I have the privilege of chairing as chairperson of the Ministerial Sub-Committee on Major Events.

So on behalf of Government which has approved the agenda which will guide us today, I wish to pay a special thanks to the 1860 Commemoration Council for the work they have done so far.

The South African nation is relatively new, but certainly, we are not a young nation. Our South African non-racial democracy has emerged from many centuries of oppression and political strife. All of us have brought thousands of years of civilization to this nation. Let us always remember this.

We cannot forget that of all of the many countries throughout the world in which Indians have settled, the first indentured labourers to arrive in this country have left a most remarkable legacy. This legacy is now carried forward by their more than 1,3 million descendants. Durban is the cultural hub of our country’s Indian people: the largest population of Indians outside of India. It is time for the legacy of Indian South Africans to be recognised and commemorated.

We must also never forget that in our quest for freedom we always refused to lose our traditions, values and beliefs. It was these very spiritual elements in the cultural heritage of each and every one of us that sustained us all in times of great sorrow and hardship. Indeed we eventually overcame the force of darkness that was Apartheid.

We now have a constitution that is one of the most forward-looking and progressive constitutions in the world. Our Rainbow Nation is the symbolic expression of our need to harness unity as a nation. We must all use our different skills and diverse backgrounds, beliefs and qualities for the greater good in the interest of nation building.

Ladies and Gentlemen, the arrival of the Indians in South Africa heralded the early beginnings of protest action against colonial tendencies that undermined and belittled the indigenous people, including Indians.

I therefore cannot see such commemoration going on without recognizing the exemplary role of Mahatma Mohandas Gandhi as a leader who demonstrated to what was to become the leadership of the mass democratic movement in South Africa, how to take up a heavily-armed colonial administration and win peacefully and without weapons.

Just last month, history was celebrated in South Africa and abroad when the whole world was celebrating 92 years of the life of a world icon, Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela, uMadiba. In one of the celebrations I attended, I indicated that we should appreciate the coincidence that we have just celebrated Madiba's life and we are now commemorating 150 years of the arrival of Indians in South Africa – and needless to say, Gandhi personifies the political significance of the arrival of the Indian people in South Africa.

Madiba and Gandhi are leaders who have demonstrated the spirit of nation- building. As we commemorate the arrival of our Indian brothers and sisters in Africa, we can only be reminded of the need to unite as the people of South Africa. We have an opportunity to make a contribution towards nation-building.

The first president of the African National Congress Albert Luthuli was influenced by the strategies of Gandhi when he adopted non-violence (or satyagraha) as the method his movement would use to fight against injustice and oppression. As we appreciate this history of leaders like Gandhi who defied evil and emerged as victors, we feel a great responsibility.

There is a sense that their successes and victories are a great burden to us as people who are running the race of leading a people in pain. Their successes place a great burden precisely because of the enormity of the challenge they faced, the ability to forgive and propagate reconstruction and renewal in the quality of race relations, human rights and democracy for all.

We stand on the shoulders of great men and women and the responsibility bestowed on us is therefore tremendous. Together we can achieve what is expected of us. When we come together as government, business, professionals and experts in various fields, NGOs, community members, the media, when we come together to face these challenges as one, we become a mighty force that cannot be stopped.

When we talk of the 1860 commemoration, we are talking about a working class issue. It is on that score that the Commemoration Council should ensure that labour movements come on board in observing such a worker-orientated celebration. But as part of the celebration, we appeal to the business community to support our youth empowerment programmes that the Commemoration Council is initiating in Durban and surrounding areas.

Once again ladies and gentlemen, thank you for being part of this important gathering which indicates your loyalty and confirms the fact that you are indeed valued citizens in our non-racial, non-sexist and democratic South Africa that is your true home.

I thank you.