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LETTER FROM THE PRESIDENT

Our country needs facts, not groundless allegations

In the Biblical Gospel according to St Matthew, it is said that Jesus Christ saw Simon Peter and his brother Andrew fishing in the Sea of Galilee. And He said to them: "Follow Me, and I will make you fishers of men."

Perhaps taking a cue from this, some in our country have appointed themselves as "fishers of corrupt men". Our governance system is the sea in which they have chosen to exercise their craft. From everything they say, it is clear that they know it as a matter of fact that they are bound to return from their fishing expeditions with huge catches of corrupt men (and women).

In March 1999, our country's Human Rights Commission (HRC) conducted hearings on the matter of "racism in the media". Not unexpectedly, instead of dealing with this serious matter, some in our country and others abroad, made a big song and dance about it, seeking to ensure that the HRC should not proceed with the hearings.

To frighten the HRC into silence, these made the absurd and self-serving allegation that these hearings constituted a threat to the freedom of the press. Fortunately, the campaign, whose central objective was to cover up racism in our country, failed.

The hearings took place. The HRC made its recommendations. Despite the scare-mongering, the press is no less free now than it was before the hearings. Others will answer the question whether it has done anything to implement at least some of the recommendations of the HRC.

The ANC made its own submission to the hearings. One of the critical issues it raised was the role of the intensely negative, highly offensive and deeply entrenched stereotype of Africans among some in our country, which makes it inevitable that much reporting in our country would be racist. The ANC made the point that this stereotype necessarily dictated that some in our country would proceed from the position that our government was corrupt as alleged, unless it

proved itself to be innocent.

Among other things, it cited the instance of an article in a weekly journal, in which the journalist concerned gratuitously accused the writer of this Letter of dictatorial tendencies. The ANC explained the circumstances surrounding the writing and publication of this article, which were relevant to the subject of the hearings.

This matter having been contested and subsequently taken to court by the journal concerned, the judge found in favour of the ANC. Needless to say, the determination made by the courts did not get the public exposure that the resort to these courts by this journal had evoked.

The false allegation of wrong doing by the ANC was what was vigorously implanted in the public mind. To the contrary, the rejection of this allegation by the courts, and therefore the independent judicial assertion of the truth about this matter, was assiduously hidden from the public.

Had this truth been communicated as openly as it should have been, it would have undermined the racist stereotype of Africans, and demonstrated the correctness of the decision of the HRC to hold its hearings. It was therefore not in the interests of some in our country, who believe in the stereotype, that this truth should be widely known.

The same stereotypical conviction about our government being corrupt, unless it proves itself innocent, has re-surfaced with regard to the defence procurement decided by our government in 2000. The fishermen (and women?) have recast their fishing nets, convinced that they will bring in a rich haul of corrupt government luminaries.

So convinced are they of the outcome of their fishing expedition that they regularly describe the defence procurement as "the arms deal scandal" or "debacle". They say "a deepening shadow of allegations is threatening to engulf the highest reaches of government".

Triumphantly, they proclaim that "the publication of details of an earlier (investigative) draft confirmed long-held suspicions by opponents of the arms procurement exercise that changes were made before publication, possibly at the instance of senior members of government".

They say "there was a crucial 'nondisclosure of facts' to a body tasked with evaluating products", and that "draft reports released in court show evidence that passages detailing possible corruption were edited from the report before it was presented to parliament".

The fishers of corrupt men happily construct doom scenarios that serve their

purposes. They speculate about the possibility of a senior official being shown to be corrupt, and how this might lead to the conclusion that the whole procurement process was corrupted, resulting in the "the whole edifice of the arms procurement exercise" crumbling. The reality is that the wish is father to the thought.

But it all sounds terribly dramatic and pregnant with the potential to expose horrifying facts about massive corruption by our government, involving billions of rands. To prepare the public mind, words such as "scandal" and "debacle" must be, and are used!

To add to the sense of impending horror, "senior members of government" must be implicated, including "the highest reaches of government", which means the President. Further to whet the appetite for the expected catch that will be brought in by the fishers, the threat is made that a "shadow of allegations might engulf" these "highest reaches".

Quite how shadows rather than substance, and allegations rather than facts might engulf the President, or anybody else for that matter, is somewhat difficult to fathom. The point however is that neither substance nor facts are important to the fishers of corrupt men in terms of their project to substantiate the stereotype of which the ANC spoke, when it made its presentation at the HRC hearings on racism in the media.

What is central is that the stereotype must be sustained and entrenched. For this purpose, precisely because of this entrenched stereotype, shadows and allegations will serve as well as anything else. Carefully chosen words with no factual information to substantiate them, such as "scandal" and "debacle", also come in as useful devices, to give the shadows and allegations the appearance of substance.

In this no-holds-barred campaign, anything and anybody who stands in the way of the fishers, including and especially the truth, must give way. In the current fishing expedition, the Auditor General (AG) has been targeted as one of the possible big fish that the fishers hope to catch.

Accordingly, they accuse the AG of doctoring the report he presented to Parliament, by omitting some details contained in an earlier draft. The AG has taken strong exception to this charge of fraud. In barely disguised language, the fishers have said that they are convinced that the AG is lying. Naturally, they will not bother to supply facts to disprove what the AG said.

As part of this campaign against the AG, they charge him with having "sanitised" and "heavily edited" the final report, "possibly at the instance of senior members of government". They say nothing of the fact that the AG is required by the law to show his draft reports to any institution he may be auditing, for any

comments it may wish to make. The AG is free to accept or reject any comments made by those he has audited.

This happens regularly, is required by law, and carries no imputation whatsoever of corrupt behaviour on the part of the AG. Precisely because he had absolutely nothing to hide by following this procedure, the AG attached an official letter to the draft report he gave the Cabinet sub-committee that approved the primary contracts, citing the provisions in the law requiring him to abide by this procedure.

The fishers have focused especially on the Thomson (Thales) element of the prime contract entered into by the government with the suppliers of the corvettes, the German Frigate Consortium (GFC). The government has explained this very clearly before, that it entered into a contract with the GFC to supply the required number of corvettes, meeting all the stipulated specifications.

The government has no contracts with the companies retained by the GFC to supply the various component parts of the corvettes. Similarly, it never had occasion or need to determine who the partners of the GFC should or should not be, including Thomson (Thales).

The proposition that the government influenced the choice of Thomson by the GFC as one of its sub-contractors is both a blatant falsity concocted by the fishers, and a logical absurdity. In its statement of 15 September 2000, the government announced those with whom it had entered into contracts. These are British Aerospace/SAAB, the German Frigate Consortium and Augusta. It had no primary contract with Thomson (Thales), as the supplier of the electronic combat suite of the corvettes, which matter, of the supplier of this suite, remained in the exclusive domain of the GFC.

In the Background Notes issued on 12 January, 2001, the government said: "It should be pointed out that the Procurement does not deal with subcontractors. This has to be the contractual obligation of the prime contractor as it is they who must deliver reliable equipment and undertake the performance and delivery obligations. This is standard practice in major contracts. To insist that the Government must be held to account for minor subcontracts is to misunderstand procurement. The prime contractors are major international corporations and we are confident that they would ensure the quality of the subcontractors and this is their responsibility."

But of course this does not matter to the fishers, who are intent to prove or otherwise entrench the stereotype of a corrupt African government. This is why their fond scenario visualises a determination that an official acted corruptly, leading, according to them, to the collapse of the "arms procurement exercise", even as they exclude the fact that the final recommendations to the deciding authority, the Cabinet, had to be, and were made by a Cabinet sub-committee, and

not officials.

An aggrieved potential and unsuccessful sub-contractor has taken his grievance to our courts. For this reason, we will not comment on the matters he raises, which the fishers nevertheless use triumphantly and wilfully to justify their campaign. But this gentleman decided to raise, in the media, the matter of an earlier process to acquire corvettes for our Navy.

The gentleman concerned makes the false allegation that during the life of the Government of National Unity, formed in 1994, a contract for four corvettes to be built by Bazan of Spain "was cancelled after being awarded". This is not true. The preceding apartheid Cabinet had not approved this contract. The GNU Cabinet decided not to enter into this contract.

Bazan entered the later competition to supply the four corvettes, and lost to the GFC. This issue is of relevance and interest only because of the controversy that some have brought into the current defence procurement. It is an interesting coincidence that this controversy has focused so intensely on the corvettes.

In time the details of the truth will come out about how the controversy concerning the 2000 defence procurement emerged and persisted. The gentleman litigant, who has raised the matter of Bazan of Spain, may be proved to have been justified in raising this issue, even if he made false claims about a Bazan contract that never was.

This detailed truthful account would tell our country interesting things about such matters as defence procurement during the apartheid years, and the promotion of political careers and fortunes in contemporary South Africa. It would tell a story about the political uses of the racist stereotypes that are part of our daily menu of information and perception, and the formation of popular consciousness.

It would inform us about the impact or otherwise of the domestic and international apartheid networks on our democratic order, and the moral integrity of those who correctly claim that they fought for the victory of this order, and therefore seek to position themselves as its true representatives.

The sooner this fascinating story is told the better, so that we can improve our performance with regard to the achievement of the critical objective of building a truly people-centred society.

As an important part of the struggle to realise this objective, we should not, and will not abandon the offensive to defeat the insulting campaigns further to entrench a stereotype that has, for centuries, sought to portray Africans as a people that is corrupt, given to telling lies, prone to theft and self-

enrichment by immoral means, a people that is otherwise contemptible in the eyes of the "civilised". We must expect that, as usual, our opponents will accuse us of "playing the race card", to stop us confronting the challenge of racism.

The fishers of corrupt men are determined to prove everything in the anti-African stereotype. They rely on their capacity to produce long shadows and innumerable allegations around the effort of our government to supply the South African National Defence Force with the means to discharge its constitutional and continental obligations. They are confident that these long shadows and allegations without number will engulf and suffocate the forces that fought for and lead our process of democratisation, reconstruction and development.

However, what our country needs is substance and not shadows, facts instead of allegations, and the eradication of racism. The struggle continues.

Thabo Mbeki

<http://www.anc.org.za/ancdocs/anctoday/2003/text/at21.txt>