

As It Is – October 29, 2013

From VOA Learning English, welcome to As It Is! I'm Steve Ember.

On our program today, we tell about new political movements in South Africa, and how race may be an issue in national elections next year.

And, we remember a space flight 15 years ago by America's oldest astronaut, John Glenn. He was 77 years old at the time.

First, to South Africa for a report about politics and race.

South Africa is preparing for national elections next year, and race has once more become an issue. One new political party has criticized the white minority who profited under the country's former system of racial separation. At the same time, a small group of white South Africans say their race is threatened with what they have called "genocide."

Political observers say out of control racial hatred is not in step with life in South Africa today.

Almost 20 years ago, South Africa's first black president, Nelson Mandela, described his country as a "rainbow nation" at peace with itself. Mr. Mandela's presidency ended the apartheid system. Under apartheid, nonwhites were oppressed and treated as unequal to white South Africans.

But racism is still a reality in the country today. And two political movements have recently used race in an effort to increase support among possible voters.

In early October, a group of white South Africans held a protest over what they described as “genocide” against the country’s whites. The group called itself Red October. It said white South Africans no longer feel safe because they are targeted and killed on their farms and in homes across the country.

The group estimates that at least 3,000 white South Africans have been killed in the past 10 years. Red October said they died mainly in incidents linked to robberies it says are evidence of hate crimes.

But the number is small when compared to the total number of murder victims. Over the past year alone, South African police confirmed more than 16,200 murders nationwide.

Another new party is accusing white South Africans of pushing up crime levels. It says whites are doing this by refusing to share their wealth with the country’s poor black majority.

The new group is the Economic Freedom Fighters Party. Its leader, Julius Malema, formerly served as president of the African National Congress Youth League. He has warned white South Africans who got land during the colonial period to return it to blacks. Mr. Malema says do so, or forget about restoring friendly relations.

He accuses white people of stealing land that rightly belonged to black South Africans. He says whites want blacks to plead for their land, but that will not happen.

“We are not going to do that. We are not going to beg for our land.”

Mr. Malema’s supporters seemed to take his message even further. For example, one sign carried at a recent party gathering read: “To be a revolutionary you have to be inspired by hatred and bloodshed.”

Helen Zille is head of South Africa’s main opposition party, the Democratic Alliance. She condemns the murders, especially those on farms. And she admits that conditions in many places are very bad, especially in unofficial, informal settlements.

“But to try and turn it into a race mobilization issue is totally counter-productive and certainly does not have my support.”

Anthea Jeffery is with the South African Institute of Race Relations. She says that while racial tensions still exist, relations have really improved over the years.

“There is obviously still a great deal of racial inequality within the country. There is of course the sense that to be black is to run a greater risk of being jobless and to be poor, and to be white is to have a much greater prospect of good jobs and income. The economic pinch is affecting everybody, and the racial scapegoat is a very easy avenue for the country to follow.”

She says the true issue is a lack of economic equality. She says the government needs to work harder to make the economy more equal.

“What we really need to see if South Africa is to get onto the right path, is an emphasis on growth. If we were to have investment and growth and jobs, it’s very important that there should be racial harmony, that there should be a sense of trust across the different population groups.”

Anthea Jeffrey and the South African Institute of Race Relations say their research suggests that Red October and the EFF represent extremes in politics. They say race is not likely to influence most South Africans when they vote next year.

Our thanks to Thuso Khumalo for this report from Johannesburg.

As It Is is coming to from VOA Learning English. I’m Steve Ember.

Remembering John Glenn's Return to Space in 1998 at Age 77

Former Astronaut Scott Carpenter: "Godspeed, John Glenn." [Countdown to launch]

Now, we travel back in time to October 29, 1998. On that day, John Glenn became America's oldest astronaut at 77 years of age. He flew on the Space Shuttle Discovery as a payload specialist.

NASA Announcer [gives countdown, then]: "Booster ignition and liftoff of Discovery with a crew of six astronaut heroes and one American legend."

The American space agency says the former Senator – and pioneer astronaut - took part in experiments on the process of aging.

John Glenn spent nine days in space. During that time, the shuttle orbited Earth 134 times.

The 1998 flight was very different from his first space flight. On February 20th, 1962, he made one of history's most important flights. He became the first American to orbit the Earth. Russian cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin was actually the first to do that.

[Radio transmission by John Glenn from Mercury capsule in 1962]:

“Oh, that view is tremendous!

“Roger, turnaround has started. Capsule turning around. I can see the booster during turnaround, just a couple hundred yards behind me. It’s beautiful.”

In four hours and 56 minutes, John Glenn circled the Earth three times in the Mercury capsule Friendship Seven.

The former test pilot became a hero and received a medal from then-President John F. Kennedy.

“A few days ago, Colonel Glenn came to the White House and visited me. And he was, as are the other astronauts, the kind of American of whom we are most proud.”

John Glenn served in the United States Senate from 1974 to 1999, representing his home state of Ohio. Today, at 92, he is the last living member of America’s Mercury astronauts.



And that's our program for today. And a reminder, for the latest world news, stay tuned to VOA for news at the top of the hour, Universal Time. Thanks for joining us. Steve Ember here, see you next time.