

Nelson Mandela: The World Mourns His Loss, Remembers His Life

Welcome to As It Is from VOA Learning English. I'm Mario Ritter in Washington.

Today, we have a special report on the memorial service for former South African President Nelson Mandela. Thousands of mourners attended the service on Tuesday in Johannesburg. The attendees included more than 70 heads of state, including the president of the United States, Barack Obama.

Later, we tell about Mandela's part in ending white minority rule in South Africa.

Mandela's Emotional Memorial

South Africans gathered Tuesday to remember and mourn former South African leader Nelson Mandela. He was recognized for his long fight against racial separation, or apartheid, in South Africa. George Grow has the report by VOA's Anita Powell who was there.

Rainy weather did not stop more than 60,000 South Africans, foreign officials and others from meeting at the Johannesburg soccer stadium to celebrate the life of Nelson Mandela.

The former president and anti-apartheid leader died Thursday at the age of 95. He had suffered continued lung infections.

He was praised in South Africa and around the world for leading the intense struggle to end South Africa's oppressive system of racial separation. He spent 27 years in prison for his opposition to the government. But after his release, he would become South Africa's first black president in 1994.

Nelson Mandela was considered extraordinary for his growth during his years in prison from an angry youth leader to a wise statesman. He became known for stressing the need for racial reconciliation in a deeply divided nation. World leaders and celebrities and crowds of South Africans met at the stadium. Mr. Mandela's last public appearance was in 2010 at the World Cup finals.

U.S. President Barack Obama spoke at the memorial. He said Mr. Mandela is his teacher, his example.

"Over thirty years ago, while still a student, I learned of Mandela and the struggles in this land. It stirred something in me. It woke me up to my responsibilities - to others, and to myself - and set me on an improbable journey that finds me here today. And while I will always fall short of Madiba's example, he makes me want to be better. He speaks to what is best inside us. "

Forty-five-year-old Johannesburg resident Thuli Fihla said she could not miss the event. She credits Mr. Mandela for helping her get ahead in life.

"As a South African, and someone who has seen apartheid before and now witnessed the new democracy, there was no way I could miss this day. Mandela is everything to us. I've got the kind of job that I have now because of Mandela. I have the kind of home that I have now because of Mandela. You know, everything we have in this country, we owe to Mandela and his colleagues."

Mr. Mandela was also a politician. And his memorial was not free of politics. Mr. Mandela's death has taken place at a time of rising disapproval for President Jacob Zuma who has been accused of corruption. The crowd expressed disapproval of Mr. Zuma many times during the event. The gathering cheered former President Thabo Mbeki and even cheered the nation's last apartheid president, F.W. de Klerk.

Mr. Mandela's body will now go to the capital, Pretoria, where it will remain for three days. He will then be buried in a family ceremony in his ancestral home of Qunu. Each province will also hold memorial ceremonies.

I'm George Grow.

How a Former Prisoner Ended Apartheid

South Africa's system of racial separation and white rule ended in a surprising way: not with violence -- but through compromise and negotiations. VOA's Anita Powell in Johannesburg spoke with two South Africans who took part in the talks. Caty Weaver has her report.

It began secretly in the 1980s with unofficial talks between Nelson Mandela and members of the South African intelligence service. At the time, Mandela had spent more than 20 years in prison for fighting the white minority government and its racial policies.

Nelson Mandela later wrote that he made a decision to reach out to the government. It was possibly the wisest political decision of his life. It led to the 1993 Nobel Peace Prize and later, his election as South Africa's first black president.

Dave Steward is head of the FW De Klerk Foundation. He says Mandela's decision was the right move. It showed the ANC was a political force that could be taken seriously. But it did not please militant members of the African National Congress.

Twenty years ago, Dave Steward was a top assistant to Mr. De Klerk, who was South Africa's president. Mr. De Klerk was involved in the later part of the negotiations. He shared the Nobel Prize with Mr. Mandela.

"The role played by Nelson Mandela at this juncture was extremely important. Sitting in prison at Pollsmoore in Capetown, he reached the conclusion, by himself and often against the advice and wishes of his colleagues, that there was not going to be an armed or military outcome to the struggle in South Africa, that there would have to be a negotiated solution."

Jay Naidoo was active in the struggle against apartheid. He says only Nelson Mandela had the ability to take such an unpopular step within the ANC. Mr. Naidoo was then head of South Africa's largest group of trade unions.

“The apartheid regime could not defeat us and we could not defeat them. We were at a stalemate. The alternative was a scorched earth. So in that context, leaders rose on both sides of the conflict to say, ‘How do we lay the basis for a peaceful settlement?’ And there was no better person to lead our side than Nelson Mandela, someone who had spent 27 years in jail for our freedom.”

Jay Naidoo also praises the labor movement and the work of trade union negotiators.

“We had a whole decade of negotiations on very tough and adversarial issues before the political negotiation process started. So I think generally speaking, the environment and the conditions for negotiations towards a peaceful settlement of the racial question and apartheid issues in South Africa, was led in very different places.”

Dave Steward says things changed quickly after the negotiations started. He says Mandela went on the offensive and “came out swinging” – a plan that might have failed with someone else.

“In fact, some of his attacks on De Klerk were quite brutal. These issues could have led to serious complications in the negotiating process if different personalities were involved.”

Both men also noted another issue that often is raised in discussions about Nelson Mandela: his powerful personality and his humility. It was that rare combination, they said, that enabled Mandela to take a brave step that changed the world around him.

I’m Caty Weaver.

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