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VOICE FILE NAME: COHP Mr RF 'Pik' Botha

Key:

SO: Sue Onslow (Interviewer)

RB: Mr RF 'Pik' Botha (Respondent)

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Date: 13th December 2012.

SO: Before 1994, what was your opinion of the Commonwealth? How much did you feel that re-entry into the Commonwealth would be valuable for South Africa?

RB: Not much. In my thinking, the Commonwealth had come to naught. But at least they approached us in 1985, after the Rubicon speech. And they arrived here early in 1986, soon after I made that remark at a press conference that the country would have a black president. And I was roasted in Parliament – with those galleries packed with women in their smart dresses and their hats and the President humiliating me. It was the best investment I ever made, that remark.

SO: At the time, General Obasanjo and his colleagues – upon coming to South Africa – also knew what a rough ride you'd had?

RB: Yes, they did. The newspapers until July-August 1986 were full of that remark. And now, here the EPG come. It was an extremely difficult task for me. I had, at first, decided to resign, and to create my own party which would have been called the National Democratic Party (NDP). For that I received commitments – indications from well-known South African enterprises running into alluring amounts. My office received over 1000 calls, telegrams, and messages from the public: "Please don't go. Hang in there." From English, Afrikaners, Indians, blacks, coloureds, the lot. I asked PW Botha's private secretary how many responses PW Botha had got – three! Three messages, congratulating him. However, some Cabinet colleagues wanted me out. But not PW. Before we had that clash which forced him to resign in August 1989, he called me into his office one day, where there was a golden seal which is handed over from one president to the other in an elegant wood display

stand. He said he wanted so much to hand this over to De Klerk, but he couldn't do it. De Klerk could come and take it, one day, if he became the President of our country. He said, "I feel I owe something to you. I must tell you that one of the most painful decisions I ever had to take was the day I had to reprimand you in Parliament. It was not my choice, it came from two of your cabinet colleagues." They had told him the Cabinet would split if he didn't do it.

SO: Please could you fill in some background on South African attitudes to the EPG visit?

RB: The first reaction here – when the news of the decision at Nassau [arrived] – was negative: "They [are] not welcome here. They [are] an ill-assorted organisation"; "Useless Commonwealth, they kicked us out in 1961!" When a mission was raised of an Eminent Persons Group coming to South Africa, Mrs Thatcher wrote a letter and I drafted the reply for PW Botha, putting in conditions implying as long as they don't interfere in South Africa's internal affairs – aspects of that nature – and to give everyone a fair chance to be heard, we agreed. And he signed it. That did it.¹

All PW Botha's letters to Thatcher were drafted by my Department. PW had great respect for Thatcher. Of all the leaders over the world, she was the one whom he felt was not in favour of crushing the National Party, leading to uncontrollable violence with serious consequences for Blacks and Whites. He believed that she appreciated – and knew – that this could also have a very negative effect for British investors.

SO: So, if it wasn't for her support, the EPG wouldn't have got through the door? This is the irony – as, to the Commonwealth, she was the villain of the piece.

RB: I can assure you, when I went to PW Botha I said, "We can't slap Margaret Thatcher in the face." She persuaded us to allow the EPG. If it was not for that lady, we would never have allowed the EPG. We would have turned round and said we have had enough of international intervention in our internal affairs. Good bye.

SO: At the CHOGM Nassau meeting in 1985, the story is that "she was in the way." The Anti-Apartheid Movement's view was that she was the problem. However, at a Witness Seminar on Britain and South Africa I organised in January 2009 [with LSE IDEAS and the Centre for Contemporary British History], her former Private Secretary, Jonathan Powell, said, "Look, governments talk to governments. That's what governments do" – implying that the AAM was actually a very useful safety valve for Mrs Thatcher, such as its demonstrations in Hyde Park when PW Botha visited Thatcher at Chequers in June 1984. She could

¹ Cf. Documents in the Margaret Thatcher Foundation Archive [www.margaretthatcher.org]:
M Thatcher to PW Botha, undated [Oct 1985], 22B0B6BA712A4A0B81430DB11991FBD9;
M Thatcher to PW Botha, 31 Oct 1985, 6D1A4F11C9AD4BD58A3493B01077D862;
PW Botha to M Thatcher, 12 Nov 1985, D9C7C22942454B03BFCAB95F679292C9;
M Thatcher to PW Botha, 17 Nov 1985, 806E0C7AA6CA4857B57A0D41107726A5;
M Thatcher to PW Botha, 14 Dec 1985, 8D5A66B1A8B14D68AE14B170F735D12C;
M Thatcher to PW Botha, 8 Jan 1986, 0555750999F148E88758BB19C54B6768;
M Thatcher to PW Botha, undated [1986] F2B2DEB1CFD540248D5FF5012F0186B9.

turn round to PW Botha and say, “Look, I have to manage this domestic constituency.” As part of her message to encourage change in South Africa, she was saying “This really matters to people here.”

RB: There are two leaders who played a significant role in getting apartheid removed peacefully: Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan. The others made it more difficult for us. Every time I was trying to further the repeal of some act embodying apartheid, the opposition I had to deal with within the National Party reproachfully reacted as a result of the negative [attention] internationally, saying, “Pik Botha, despite repealing the legislation, the UNO [has] passed a worse condemnatory Resolution.” These were the two leaders who were nonetheless impressed by what the rest of the world considered face-saving minor changes. And they made it clear that they were opposed to violence as the force of change in South Africa. It should be free and fair democratic elections. I was pointing out to our caucus that we cannot insult these two. We cannot insult Margaret Thatcher. She is opposed to severe economic sanctions. I used this as a bargaining chip, a crowbar, in order to move faster towards dismantling apartheid. History owes them a debt, and recognition. It was Thatcher’s views – she strongly rejected apartheid and urged us to release Mandela. But she also told the ANC, “I am not going to support negotiation if you continue to resort to violence as a means of achieving your objective.”

SO: So PW Botha was concerned that, if the EPG was allowed to come, they’d be used as an internal lobbying group? When you say that the Eminent Persons Group played a historic role without really knowing it, what do you mean by that?

RB: The EPG came closer to success than most people realise. They had numerous meetings with Government members. They met with Mr Mandela three times in the Pollsmoor prison. They reported extensively on Mr Mandela’s views. In their report, the EPG said they were forcibly struck by the overwhelming desire in South Africa for a non-violent negotiated settlement. On 13 March 1986, the EPG transmitted their ‘Possible Negotiating Concept’ [document] to us. I knew that Mr Mandela personally was prepared to accept the Negotiating Concept on the understanding that his colleagues in the ANC be consulted in order to obtain their acceptance as well.

The ‘Negotiating Concept’ was a prophetic document. It embodied all the elements which formed the basis of the negotiations between the South African Government and the ANC four years later. Those negotiations led to the new era in South Africa’s history. For that reason, I will be grateful if you can reproduce in full:

[Reproduced from RF Botha, ‘His South African Connection’, in Hans d’Orville (ed.), *Leadership for Africa: In Honor of Olusegun Obsanjo on the Occasion of his 60th Birthday* (New York, 1995), pp.55-70, p.66]

“The South African Government has declared its commitment to dismantling the system of apartheid, to ending racial discrimination and to broad-based negotiations leading to new constitutional arrangements for power-sharing by all the people of South Africa. In the light of preliminary and as yet incomplete discussions with representatives of various organisations and groups, within

and outside South Africa, we believe that in the context of specific and meaningful steps being taken towards ending apartheid, the following additional action might ensure negotiations and a break in the cycle of violence.

“On the part of the Government:

- a) Removal of the military from the townships, providing for freedom of assembly and discussion and suspension of detention without trial.*
- b) The release of Nelson Mandela and other political prisoners and detainees.*
- c) The unbanning of the ANC and PAC and the permitting of normal political activity.*

“On the part of the ANC and others:

Entering negotiations and suspending violence.

“It is our view that simultaneous announcements incorporating these ideas might be negotiated if the Government were to be interested in pursuing this broad approach.

“In the light of the Government’s indication to us that it:

- 1) is not in principle against the release of Nelson Mandela and similar prisoners;*
- 2) is not opposed in principle to the unbanning of any organisation;*
- 3) is prepared to enter into negotiations with the acknowledged leaders of the people of South Africa;*
- 4) is committed to the removal of discrimination, not only from the statute books but also from South African society as a whole;*
- 5) is committed to the ending of white domination;*
- 6) will not prescribe who may represent black communities in negotiations on a new constitution for South Africa;*
- 7) is prepared to negotiate on an open agenda.*

The South African Government may wish to give serious consideration to the approach outlined in this note.”

The ‘Negotiating Concept’ was a balanced document, couched in inoffensive language, inviting the two opposing forces to start talking and to stop fighting about the country’s future. General Obasanjo’s hand was all over the document.

I drafted the postscript points (1) to (7). I was deeply satisfied that it was used prominently in the Concept. Eyebrows were lifted on our side but I was not shot down.

Our discussions with the EPG floundered on the issue as to whether the ANC should merely ‘suspend’ violence or instead ‘terminate’ it. There were also a few other questions of concern to us, but the main problem was that if ‘suspending’ violence meant only discontinuing violence for as long as negotiations continued, then the threat of a resumption of violence would become a bargaining counter. In other words: “Keep talking... or else.”

Significantly, this same issue again formed the major stumbling block in getting the negotiations going four years later. It was eventually resolved at the end of 1990. The irony is that, today, few South Africans would even know what the fuss was about. In such a way it is that history moves us past some of our most earnest issues.

But the real trigger was our Air Force. The very day that General Obasanjo was going to hand to me – on 19 May 1986 – their final Possible Negotiating Concept, the Director General of my department, Neil Van Heerden, phoned me at about 5.00-6.00 AM to say that he had been phoned about an hour earlier by a senior officer to say they were already on their way to bomb Harare, Gaborone and Lusaka against ANC targets. Unfortunately, that capsized the boat.

SO: You had no inkling whatsoever of these attacks?

RB: They kept it from us. To this day, I have a suspicion that they cleared it with PW Botha and that he was beginning to become concerned about the EPG and their proposals. On 19 May 1986, I formally responded to the EPG's Negotiating Concept in a letter to General Obasanjo and Mr Fraser. It was the culmination of intense debate and argumentation amongst my colleagues and myself. It was the best I could do. I expressed the Government's concerns on the issue of violence and three other points but ended by saying: "The South African Government would welcome further discussions which could accommodate the Government's concerns. I would like to thank you and your colleagues for the spirit in which we have been able to conduct our discussions."

I should have added a postscript: "My particular thanks to Olusegun Obasanjo."

On 5 June 1986, the Co-Chairman responded. They did not agree with the South African Government's points of concern and reiterated their belief that the Negotiating Concept would assist in achieving negotiations in a nonviolent atmosphere.

General Obasanjo was only too aware of the disastrous consequences of misconceptions and notional preconceptions. He warned that they should not be underestimated. Instead, they needed to be removed. The mind-sets of both black and white had to be changed. Both had come to realise that only one country, South Africa, would have to be shared for both to survive and live in peace.

He remained optimistic for success in South Africa. "I have confidence in the inevitability of victory... and believe that we can bring it about without revenge, recrimination and bitterness," he once said.

The fateful critical divergence of views between the South African Government and the ANC on the issue of 'terminating' or 'suspending' violence in 1986 is a classic illustration of an innate human trait which has been haunting humanity for centuries. I call it the 'revocability fear'.

The ANC suspected that the Government's design to get them to agree to the termination of all violence on their part was to gain time to consolidate its position, internally and externally. The Government could then enter into protracted negotiations – producing proposals which might seem reasonable and acceptable to the outside world but which would rob the ANC of a strong bargaining counter in extracting concessions from the Government. In short, the ANC believed that the Government would not voluntarily relinquish power, come what may.

The Government, in turn, believed that the ANC's willingness to 'suspend' violence was their strategy to get the talks going – with total world support – and then to make demands under the threat of a resumption of violence if their demands were not met. They would then exploit anti-apartheid world opinion to support their resumption of violence.

What I had in mind in making my ultimate appeal on 19 May 1986 to the EPG for further discussions on the issue of violence was to explore the feasibility of an international or Commonwealth guarantee or pledge, to the effect that the international community would expect both parties to implement their commitments in good faith and would monitor the process. I drafted the postscript points (1) to (7), which required Cabinet approval. And it was not easy to get approval.

SO: Who were your greatest opponents in getting approval?

RB: Well, the President was hesitant, and some ministers.

SO: Chris Heunis?

RB: Not so much Chris. It didn't appeal to him that I played such a central role in the EPG discussions as, strictly speaking, he was the responsible minister for internal constitutional affairs. So, perhaps he felt I was overstepping the margin. Perhaps I did.

SO: You had a considerable number of informal discussions with the EPG, and with its leaders.

RB: You mustn't forget the visit of the EC three – one was the Italian, who was a great friend of mine. It is mentioned here...

SO: The EC? When Geoffrey Howe came to represent the EC?

RB: No, he was not part of that. It was the European Community who sent a delegation of three: the one who had the presidency chair for the previous year, the current one and the next year. And already, then, we started to formulate some important points of departure.

"It is the conviction of the Government that any future constitutional dispensation providing for participation by all South African citizens should be the result of negotiations with the leaders of all communities." Not just those whom we select. "The Government will not prescribe who may represent black communities in negotiations on a new constitution for South Africa. The only condition is that those who participate in negotiations should forswear

violence...” – that is the key – “...as the means of achieving political objectives”. [Cited from RF Botha, ‘His South African Connection’, in Hans d’Orville (ed.), *Leadership for Africa: In Honor of Olusegun Obasanjo on the Occasion of his 60th Birthday* (New York, 1995), pp.55-70, p.60]

We used that in 1985. When I drafted [this] for PW Botha [for] his opening of Parliament statement, it was not part of the printed version when he pulled it out of his pocket and read it – that we would release Mandela if he would abandon violence as a means of achieving political objectives.

SO: Sir, had you drafted this before the arrival of the EPG?

RB: No, no. It was while they were here. You will see, here, [referring to the article in Hans d’Orville’s *Leadership for Africa* edited volume, cited above] the EPG was at first not happy with our first reactions. Those points did not appeal to the EPG. For them, it was too vague. They came back to us, and you will see, here, how they deal with this. After they had showed their dissatisfaction with our discussions on what they regarded as rather vague – those that I quoted here – I then... here are the basic seven points which they accepted.

[Botha’s article quotes the EPG’s reaction as stating that: “*The South African Government’s position defies succinct summary. It has perfected a specialised political vocabulary which, while saying one thing, means quite another. Thus the states approach to negotiations was qualified by a number of provisos, which were repeatedly underlined in the course of our discussions. While apartheid was declared ‘outmoded’, ‘finished’ and, indeed ‘dead’, the Government’s objective was the exercise of political rights and freedoms within the structures of ‘groups’ or ‘communities’. South Africa was a nation of minorities and future constitutional arrangements would give expression to individual aspirations only within the confines of their ethnic groups. Group rights were to take precedence over individual rights, with built-in assurances of no one group being dominated by others. Western democratic practice had no relevance to South African conditions.*” See RF Botha, ‘His South African Connection’, in Hans d’Orville (ed.), *Leadership for Africa: In Honor of Olusegun Obasanjo on the Occasion of his 60th Birthday* (New York, 1995), pp.55-70, p.61].

SO: When you had meetings with the EPG, did you have meetings with these ‘Seven Wise Men’ as a unit, or did you have individual meetings with General Obasanjo?

RB: When General Obasanjo and Malcolm Fraser, who were co-Chairmen, landed here, I did not – as is normal practice – meet them at the international airport. I arranged for a VIP military helicopter to take Obasanjo on a trip around the Pretoria/Witwatersrand/Vereeniging industrial complex. That is the present Gauteng, the economic heart of South Africa. That flight took almost an hour, so you can imagine it was quite a distance. Then, they landed at the Waterkloof military airbase, and there I met him. He came out and we greeted each other. I asked, “How are you?” and he said, “I am shocked.” Those were his words: “I am shocked.” “For a moment, I did not know what was going on,” he went on. “I did not know that there exists a place like that on the African continent.” That was Obasanjo’s reaction. He said, “I have never seen anywhere in Africa what I have seen here. And that is so precious. It has got

to be preserved.” So, that indicates to you there was a special relationship between the two of us. So, we often met, just the two of us. Fraser was more difficult. I never met with him alone. I only met with Obasanjo alone.

SO: In what ways was Fraser more difficult?

RB: You must study his history, and then you will see. Even the Australians kicked him out. I don’t want to go into that, it might sound like personal insults.

SO: But personal chemistry is important in this type of top-level negotiation?

RB: Obasanjo is an African, and I am an African. We are both Africans. Fraser was an international figure from outside. And, of course, he was against apartheid – but that does not mean that Obasanjo was for apartheid. But, Obasanjo had a far greater appreciation of our history, of the history of the Afrikaner, of the Great Trek. He said that the Afrikaner is an inherent part of Africa. Other Africans should acknowledge this to a greater extent, and, by doing so, diminish the Afrikaner’s fear of being overwhelmed.

SO: So you shared unspoken assumptions, given your African view points of the world, which you did not share with others from outside the continent?

RB: If you are not from Africa – if you are outside, and haven’t lived here, [haven’t] gone through wars here, and histories? We participated in WWI. We took Namibia from the Germans. In WWII, we virtually chased out the Italians, then went to fight the Germans in the North, in El Alamein. In the concentration camps of the Anglo-South African war, 34,000 women and children died: ten per cent of the Boer population of Paul Kruger’s Republic and the Orange Free State. In today’s South Africa, that would mean – in terms of the present population – that five million South Africans would die. That was part of our history. And people like Obasanjo knew this. He had a sympathy for it. As did people like Houphouët Boigny of Ivory Coast, like Arap Moi, like Kenneth Kaunda, like Samora Machel, Senghor. I could visit them anytime. They would receive me.

SO: Did you feel the same sense of connection with John Malecela, the Tanzanian representative on the EPG?

RB: By then, I had learned a little bit about how international conferences come to naught and why. It is often because the gatherings are simply too large.

SO: So, was that also true of the dynamic of your discussions with the EPG? ‘Seven Wise Men’ was still too large a group?

RB: I immediately found in Obasanjo a fellow African who had an understanding for the history of the Afrikaner. And the others did not.

SO: What about Anthony Barber? Did you feel the same sense of affinity with him?

RB: No. He wasn't as senior. Obasanjo was a fellow chairman. Decisions must be taken. And I have learned in life who is taking the decisions.

SO: So you concentrate on the top?

RB: Yes. And we became – and we remained – friends. What later happened was [that] he was arrested by Abacha. Obasanjo's wife, who later died, had a bag with a false bottom in which she could take letters to him, and take letters out. The rest of the bag was filled with tinned food and drinks. In this way, a chief – and this was already after 1994, when I had just become Minister of Mineral and Energy Affairs – came to present a letter from Obasanjo in prison. The letter implied that he might be killed in prison. But while I was still Minister of Foreign Affairs, Abacha sent a delegation to me – a big one, 8 or 9...it cost us a lot to accommodate them properly – asking me to get in touch with the Americans and the British. I phoned Douglas Hurd, whom I regarded as a friend – he had a home in the rural areas, and I [had] spent an entire day there; it was that sort of relationship. And Abacha said the US and GB were forcing severe sanctions against Nigeria. They couldn't go anywhere. They pleaded with me to try and talk to the Americans and British, at least to lift some of the travel restrictions on them. I don't know to whom I spoke in America, but in Britain it was Douglas. His first reaction was, "Pik, don't tell me you have now become an advocate for that scoundrel!" I said, "No, Douglas. First of all, I agree, he is a scoundrel, but I think I have a better knowledge of the effect of sanctions than you have." "What do you mean?" [he replied,] not unfriendly, or nasty. "Because we were victims of sanctions, and eventually it is not the decision-makers who pay the price. It is the normal, ordinary people. The decision-makers keep driving in their smart cars, and living their highfalutin type of life. It is the same here. Your sanctions have no effect on Abacha and his Cabinet, and those who are kerbed by sanctions. He lives lavishly, but the Nigerians suffer; they pay the price, because certain economic progress cannot get off the ground. Whether you like it or not, there are certain programmes in Nigeria which require European and American assistance, know-how and capital." Douglas was sympathetic and said, "Leave it to me." He would talk to the Americans and see if there could be some relief.

Abacha's delegation was quite pleased. They returned to Nigeria and a little later they arrested Obasanjo. The chief – well known in Nigeria, a lean and tall man – came to see me with the letter smuggled from Obasanjo in prison, as I said earlier. The headman also told me Obasanjo's wife had told him Abacha was going to apply a deceitful action, namely to pretend Obasanjo had got flu and that he needed an injection, and then kill him. Obasanjo himself told me later – after his release – that they made several attempts to give him injections, which he refused every time. He feared the day that he would be held down forcibly on the bed and given an injection. This is not known, and it sounds like a fantasy story. This is what happened. There is the evidence...

[RB points to a lengthy, handwritten dedication to 'My good brother and friend Pik' in a copy of Hans d'Orville (ed.), *Leadership for Africa: In Honor of Olusegun Obasanjo on the occasion of His 60th Birthday* (New York, 1995). The dedication reads: "With profound respect for working with us at a most crucial time in the history of South Africa to achieve the watershed and

wishing you the best of luck, health and success in every endeavour. It is great joy for me that South Africa is succeeding in solving its political problems. I wish every one of our brothers and sisters peace, joy, satisfaction, contentment and prosperity. It is always a great delight to be here in South Africa which is almost a second home to me. Please accept my special gratitude for efforts to secure my release from prison.”]

SO: What efforts did you make?

RB: I then contacted Abacha via the Nigerian representative in Gaborone, as they did not have one here. I made contact. It was a High Commissioner. “You send a message to Abacha, that if he killed Obasanjo, I will make it my life’s foremost and lasting ideal to destroy him. Send that message.” Despite the fact that Douglas Hurd felt that I was off track, nevertheless, I did it. I put into jeopardy my relationship with Douglas Hurd. Of course I have no evidence that this saved Obasanjo’s life, but he wasn’t killed. That is the real meaning of those words. We discussed it again when he came here to South Africa in 1998, when I was no more a Minister in Mandela’s cabinet since 1996. We met there in the old Governor General’s office, which is now an international conference centre. He embraced me with tears when he signed the book for me, on 16th July.

SO: Sir, you are setting out a remarkable political friendship, a personal friendship.

RB: Now, we are back at the EPG. And read those seven points. They are the key points, Sue. The EPG told Minister Heunis and myself at a meeting on 12 March 1986 that, if the SAG saw no merit in their proposals, little purpose would be served by taking them to other relevant parties and outside South Africa. Although the efforts of the EPG did not succeed, the Negotiating Concept was a prophetic document. It embodied all the elements which formed the basis of negotiations between the South African Government and the ANC four years later. Those negotiations led to the new era in South Africa’s history.

SO: Sir, can I just suggest to you that the arrival of the EPG was to your advantage in the pursuit of reform?

RB: For sure! No question about it. It was of remarkable significance. These were the basic points of our first meeting with the ANC, four years later. I don’t know why historians haven’t picked it up. I don’t understand it!

SO: I think because they had convinced themselves so much that the South African Government – as they conceived it – was so rigidly against reform and negotiation. I am not saying this is true, Sir. I am talking about perceptions outside South Africa that take time to dissipate.

RB: But, I repeat to you, there it is. In 1986; not 1990.

SO: So, was this a missed opportunity, then, in 1986, to accelerate reform?

- RB: No, and yes. If this was accepted – if we could reach agreement on ‘termination’ and not ‘suspension’ of violence – then negotiations might have started earlier, but the war in Angola would have remained a stumbling block.
- SO: Sir, you also assisted in the EPG meeting Mandela, because the Minister of Justice was much more resistant to this idea.**
- RB: Of course he was. He turned down virtually every request from prominent outsiders to visit Mandela.
- SO: How did you do that?**
- RB: I went to PW. I said to him, “You can forget about any further positive results from the EPG if we don’t [do] this. They are here as a result of Margaret Thatcher’s intervention.” I used her name.
- SO: Was that a powerful card to play with PW Botha?**
- RB: Oh yes, all along, all the time. I did so often – even with the Coventry Four. Yes, there were one or two terse reactions from the British Government’s side, but it didn’t derail anything. Not at all. You look at the judgement that day, and the terms on which the bail was forfeited, etc. From Britain’s side, the British officials said to me, “You’ve got us over a barrel.” Because the British Consul transgressed in terms of international law in allowing these people to enter the Consulate. That was, strictly speaking, against international law. And, in terms of international law, a country like South Africa could take reprisals.
- SO: They [i.e. South African anti-apartheid activists] were claiming diplomatic immunity by trying to enter the [British] Consulate in Durban. [Referring to events in August 1984].**
- RB: But you can’t ask for refuge in your Consulate in South Africa. A British subject cannot take refuge in a foreign embassy in London if he intended to blow up your House of Commons. The British Government is entitled to arrest those British citizens who are suspected of planning violence. The Embassy or Consulate can accommodate a refugee with no criminal record whatsoever who, for purely political reasons, fear prosecution. There, amnesty comes into it. But not in the case of suspects who intend to commit the violent overthrow of a government.
- SO: Sir, please can I just present how it was seen by the other side? You are setting out the contribution of a dialogue between you and the EPG; particularly, you and the leader of the EPG, which laid the critical groundwork for negotiations. At the time, the EPG and those outside – looking back on South Africa’s actions – interpreted the bombing of the three capitals [i.e. Lusaka, Gaborone, and Harare, by the South African Defence Force] as a message from South Africa. That was not what was intended within South Africa, but that is how it was perceived.**
- RB: Yes. I cannot deny that our air attacks had a negative effect on rescuing the Negotiating Concept.

SO: They also perceived that this meant the EPG mission was a failure – because you did not have the meeting between the EPG and the Constitutional Committee, which was scheduled for that day [19th May 1986], and they felt that the immediate withdrawal of the EPG contributed to their pressure on the SAG. That is the perception from outside. But you are saying that, in actual fact, the dynamic of what was going on inside the country was fundamentally different.

RB: Yes. One point which I cannot contradict is the negative effect of bombing the three capitals of Commonwealth countries. It was clear to me that the EPG had lost faith in any successful outcome.

SO: Did Obasanjo feel that his personal negotiations with you had also failed?

RB: No. We both felt that events took place in which we had no hand. I wrote letters to try to revive negotiations. Our friendship continued.

When PW Botha resigned, De Klerk became president. He became president immediately on Botha's resignation, in August 1989, after a clash with me. I would have taken De Klerk to Kenneth Kaunda because we had heard that Kaunda might take the issue of the Koevoet – which was a police unit – to the Security Council. And they might have asked for a ban of Koevoet, which, to me, was a sore point – a dangerous thing – at that stage. The elections in Namibia had gone a long way now, after almost a fatal start as a result of SWAPO transgressions over the border. I thought that, now De Klerk was leader of the National Party but not the President – PW remained President and constitutionally head of state – I wanted to go and see Kaunda and talk him out of it.

SO: Sir, were you also not also considering resignation when De Klerk became acting president?

RB: Resignation? I did consider resignation after PW Botha's severe reprimand in Parliament – á propos of my statement in February 1986 that "the country could have a black president". But not now. I have worked my whole life – first the 1960s, then the 70s, now the 80s – [and] now at last I can get rid of this albatross. It is a question of two-three months and then Namibia is independent. You can't resign then. You have got to find a way out. PW Botha would not resign because he said I did not consult him in arranging this visit with Kaunda. I did consult him! And two of my officials were present when I phoned him, and they could confirm. And when I mentioned this to PW on the phone, he said to me, "That's a lie." I said, "I had two officials with me." He said, "Now you are listening in!" I said, "No, we are not listening in", which said to me [that] his stroke had had an effect. But, be that as it may, the next day a senior minister – I was the senior minister in the Cabinet according to the Constitution – asked for nominations for the head of state. Immediately, it was De Klerk. We had known this beforehand, so we had arranged for a senior judge to be present to swear him in. So, now we had an acting President until the elections – which we won. Then I walked into De Klerk's office and said, "Two things are a priority: Mandela's release and dismantling our nuclear weapons." He said, "Pik, you do not have to convince me. Those

are my priorities also. Rest assured, we will do so. We will discuss when and how.” That was before the Berlin Wall.

SO: Sir, in that De Klerk had been one of your most vocal critics when you had said – at that press conference – about the possibility of a black president, how do you account for... A mere three years later ...

RB: He took the quantum leap!

SO: Yes, but what do you think could have pushed or encouraged him to take the quantum leap?

RB: I think the beginning of the year when PW Botha wrote a letter to the caucus of the National Party telling them he was resigning the leadership position of the party, but not the Presidency; then, the caucus elected De Klerk. And his relationship with PW was cold, and became worse and worse. When De Klerk was elected, as usual – why I was nominated, I don’t know – the votes that I got (10-15%) went to Du Plessis. And the votes that Heunis got went to Barend Du Plessis. 78-72. That must have been balm in his acceptance: “if, after taking a quantum leap, you will find us there when you land.” Then De Klerk knew almost 50% of the caucus would be there already.

SO: He already had a constituency behind him?

RB: He would only need 10% of them and he would be in the majority.

SO: So, was De Klerk responding to a younger constituency – a generational shift within the caucus – then?

RB: I believe so. By 1989, the *verligte* or reformist section of the NP had grown to about half the caucus. It started when I was nominated for the leadership in 1978. We were the younger generation. They urged me to stand. We knew that it was going to be either Connie Mulder or PW Botha who would be elected. We wanted to give the party a notice that we must change. “If we do not do it, the NP will just carry on as before.” When I consulted with Mr Vorster – because he was then at least in the running for the Presidency – his words were, “Connie Mulder, a babe in the woods; PW Botha, a bull in a china shop. Pik, I’m sorry I could not hang in there any longer, because I think you would have made it in another year. But not now. You people are too young.” I received 22 votes, almost 15% of the caucus and our votes then ensured that PW made it.

So, De Klerk did exactly that. We met as a Cabinet at Nyala – a game reserve in the north – and it was finally decided to release Mandela. We still had to find a date for our first discussions.

SO: Had you met Mandela before this point?

RB: Not then. But Mandela, in his book [*A Long Walk to Freedom*], mentions that he requested the Minister of Justice to see PW Botha and me. They never conveyed it to me; never, never. Perhaps they decided not to inform me of Mandela’s request in the light of my media statement in February 1986, to the effect that we could one day have a Black President.

SO: Do you see that as another missed opportunity?

RB: Yes. I think we could have met earlier than our first meeting in May 1990 [re: the historic meeting between the South African Government and the ANC in Groote Schuur on 2 May 1990]. To this day, I remain deeply impressed by Mandela's opening address. He displayed a remarkably thorough knowledge of the history of the Afrikaner, referring to the pain and sorrow of the Anglo-Boer War: 34,000 women and children who died in concentration camps; Boer soldiers returning to graves and ruined farms; the ensuing poverty of the Afrikaner and his harrowing feeling of being wronged, humiliated and oppressed. The enormous suffering of the Afrikaner, he could understand. But what he could not understand, he said, was why the Afrikaner, when he started recovering from his devastation, why he didn't then reach out to his fellow black South Africans, who were equally impoverished, degraded and subjected.

Madiba delivered this statement without rancour or enmity. This was not a malicious diatribe. This came from a man who had experienced suffering in a prison for 27 years. He posed a question to us which has haunted me ever since. He led us with magnanimity through the turbulence of adapting to the responsibilities of a government of national unity, based on majority rule. He remained true to the legacy pronounced in his historic statement in Court on 23 April 1964 when he was sentenced to life imprisonment:

[Reads...] *"During my lifetime I had dedicated myself to the struggle of the African people. I have fought against White domination and I have fought against Black domination. I have cherished the ideal of a democratic and free society in which all persons lived together in harmony and with equal opportunities. It is an ideal which I hope to live for and achieve, but if needs be, it is an ideal for which I am prepared to die."*

After that meeting [on 2 May 1990], a relationship based on mutual trust and confidence took root and, over the ensuing years, grew into a bond of unconditional and intimate friendship – personal friendship.

As the negotiations progressed and stumbling blocks arose, we got to know one another better. The first crisis occurred with the opening of Codesa. Mandela and De Klerk had harsh words for each other, as the direct result of a misunderstanding. Everybody was tense and emotional. I sought out Mandela after the outburst and told him that a message that De Klerk had sent him beforehand had not reached him. But what was done was done. They had to thrash things out before the following day's proceedings, otherwise we would all get bogged down. He listened attentively and I could see he would do what he could to restore peace. I had a similar conversation with De Klerk and the next day they shook hands in front of hundreds of Codesa delegates.

Apart from the multiple formal meetings, over a period of four years we met alone on a number of occasions – mostly at his request – to discuss sensitive matters. We gave each other advice over actions in order to reach a common goal. At one of our one-on-one meetings [after May 1990], he was deeply concerned about us – the NP – driving our white right-wing into a rebellion.

SO: He was right, as the threat was definitely there at the time. This was not the stuff of imagination.

RB: Yes, the threat was there but we did not believe that a significant number of our white voters would have supported it. However, Mandela reprimanded us seriously for driving the white right-wing too far to the right. He told me one evening, "But have you forgotten what they did to you in Pietersburg? They broke up your meeting with force, and the police could not stop them." Ironically, he blamed the government for pushing the far right too far to the right, and [suggested] that this could lead to a potentially uncontrollable uprising. My reaction was, "Mr President, would you prefer to negotiate rather with them?" His reaction was, "Pik, don't be sarcastic. You know as well as I do that I reject their political programme. But you also know, as well as I do, that we both agree that we must not allow violence ever again to threaten our progress towards a prosperous democratic country."

The violence in the country – particularly KwaZulu-Natal – was one of his most urgent concerns. There were several crises. The Boipatong massacre on June 17 1992. The ANC blamed the government. I think Madiba later realised that the ANC overreacted. Boipatong was an act of retaliation by IFP members to avenge a previous attack by ANC supporters. President De Klerk immediately had the massacre probed by the Goldstone Commission which found that there was no evidence of involvement in the carnage by the government or senior police officials. But, in the meantime, the ANC announced that it had withdrawn from further negotiations until a long list of demands had been met. The government refused. Mass demonstrations followed all over the country, eventually culminating in the Bisho massacre. Nevertheless, we succeeded in resuming negotiations on 21 August 1992, which resulted in the 'Record of Understanding' and kick-started the negotiations again.

We were together in Washington. I was present when he and De Klerk received the Nobel Peace Prize in Oslo. Then, to Stockholm. In March and April new storms broke out. Chaos in Bophuthatswana: among other reasons, because President Mangope did not want to take part in the election. When trouble erupted in Mmabatho, Mangope called in the help of General Constand Viljoen, an ally at the time. He gathered his 3000 strong followers at the Mmabatho airport in a bid to try and restore order. But they were pre-empted by Eugene TerreBlanche's AWB, who exchanged fire with Mangope's troops. General Viljoen did the wise thing and retreated. The government of Venda, meanwhile, collapsed, followed by the Ciskei. Election preparations could then be put in motion in those areas. General Viljoen decided to form his own party, the Freedom Front, and to participate in the elections. I was delegated on 12 March 1994 to inform President Mangope that he had lost his power and was no longer president of Bophuthatswana. It was a painful mission. But, thereafter, preparations could go ahead for the election to take place in Bophuthatswana as well.

At this point, KwaZulu was still out of the elections. The ANC insisted that Buthelezi be removed as leader of the KwaZulu government and be replaced by an administrator. At that time, this would have had disastrous consequences. Talks followed with Buthelezi and King Goodwill to enlist their cooperation and to ensure that an election could be held in KwaZulu. Initially,

there was progress, but on 28 March 1994 the IFP organised a provocative march in Johannesburg, which ended with shootings at Shell House, the ANC headquarters. All hell broke loose, but De Klerk managed to arrange a meeting between himself, King Goodwill, Mandela and Buthelezi on 8 April 1994. This resulted in the ANC and IFP hastily agreeing to their constitutional differences being negotiated by a group of international mediators. Dr Henry Kissinger and Lord Carrington [were] requested to come to South Africa in all haste to mediate. They [were], however, perplexed and powerless against the onslaught of arguments and counter-arguments between the ANC and IFP, and withdrew.

Then, 11 days before the election, Professor Washington Okumu of Kenya suddenly appeared on the scene. To this day, I do not know how it came about that he landed up here, but when he came to see me I urged him to convince Buthelezi to take part in the election, and to do so forthwith.

He was rushed to the airport where Buthelezi was catching a private plane to KwaZulu. When he arrived, Buthelezi had already departed. But, as luck would have it, Okumu still lingered at the airport for a while, because shortly after take-off the plane malfunctioned and the pilot was forced to turn around. And so Okumu was able to meet Buthelezi and persuade him to participate in the election.

After the election, De Klerk nominated six ministers to serve in Mandela's Cabinet. I was allocated the portfolio of Mineral and Energy Affairs. It was another Cabinet. Another atmosphere. But the cabinet functioned smoothly. On one occasion, about six months after the new government of National Unity came to power, an event occurred during a cabinet meeting which nearly led to a break-up of the cabinet. Mandela criticised De Klerk's style. According to Mandela, De Klerk would sometimes create the impression that he felt superior to black people. De Klerk was highly agitated and withdrew. He requested the six National Party members of the Cabinet to accompany him. We went with him. Myself and Roelf Meyer got his permission to talk to Mandela. Thabo Mbeki arranged an appointment for us at Mandela's home in Johannesburg. Over many years, I had learnt one important lesson: in a rash moment you can easily say things you do not mean. Mandela gave us a friendly reception. We had a frank conversation with him. I will leave the particulars there. The next day, peace was restored.

Early in May 1996, the executive committee of the National Party endorsed De Klerk's decision to withdraw from the Government of National Unity. The executive was divided over the matter. Myself, Roelf Meyer, Chris Fisser and nearly half the members were opposed to this move. But we had no choice. Thus my political career ended overnight. I resigned as Member of Parliament and subsequently also from the National Party. I have not joined any political party since then.

I, nevertheless, still often had meetings with Mandela and conversations over the telephone over pertinent issues. On 1 May 1998, I underwent an operation to have my prostate removed due to cancer. That afternoon, after the operation, President Mandela visited me. When I came to my senses he was standing next to my bed in the ICU. He took my hand and said, "I have come today to say to you not to worry. You must relax. You have made it.

That is all that matters. I have been through the same ordeal and I survived. We need you. Get well and carry on.” This is how I got to know him – an unfathomable human being. An elder brother. A person who spent 27 years in prison and then handled the Presidency of the country as if he had never spent a single day in jail. When he said goodbye, the pain of the surgeon’s knife disappeared, but in my mind I couldn’t stop wrestling with remorse over what he had endured. [Extracts read from RF Botha, ‘Reflections on Mandela’, written on the occasion of Nelson Mandela’s 90th birthday, 18 July 2008].

SO: Sir, did the EPG or General Obasanjo play any other supporting role in the transition to black majority government? Did you have any more private contacts with General Obasanjo between 1986 and 1990?

RB: We remained in contact with each other. He then became President of Nigeria again.

SO: How did you stay in touch? Through private letters, or more formal contacts?

RB: I visited him in Nigeria. I assisted certain South African companies on certain matters. When he came here the other day, the two of us met at the airport, privately, one-on-one. None of his staff present. I had no staff any more, in any case. What I am trying to convey to you is [that] the EPG came to South Africa after the awful aftermath of PW Botha’s Rubicon speech. For the first time in a long time an international organisation was presenting a negotiating concept which was largely acceptable to us but for the unfortunate disagreement on whether the ANC ought to agree to ‘terminate’ violence instead of ‘suspending’ violence.

SO: How many of your colleagues valued the EPG in the same way? Was there any private discussion or comment? I can quite see why members of your Department might have been positive, but did the De Klerks and Chris Heunis’ of this world see the outcome of the EPG’s mission in quite the same way?

RB: That’s difficult to answer. At least they agreed that we could submit the seven points referred to earlier to the EPG.

You refer to the support I received from my Department. We were like a family. We were relatively isolated. Our diplomats’ children paid a heavy price. I knew what it was like, living as a diplomat in Sweden or abroad. It was not just that the outside world despised and rejected apartheid as a senseless policy. It was also a conviction on our part. Even if we could, for years, survive relying on our military strength to keep going, we would be destroying the country. I remember urging the white directors of companies – including our English-speaking ones in Johannesburg – at the time to appoint blacks in their board of directors. A CEO of an important company stood up and took offence: “It is our right to appoint who we consider suitable.” I replied, “I don’t want to infringe on your rights, I want to perpetuate your well-being and future. In our country, black and white need each other to succeed.”

SO: How was the EPG's visit presented in the South African press at the time?

RB: The South African media in general supported us in principle on our proposal that the ANC should agree to the 'termination' of violence, as against 'suspension'. And the media felt that they were correct in their opinion because, after we had started negotiations, a few members of the ANC came in and established 'safe houses' to store weapons and arms so that, if the negotiations broke down, the ANC would not be without arms to pursue violence. Mandela was completely unaware of this errand. Mac Maharaj was one of those arrested. It was big news. In other words, a section in the ANC also feared that the talks would break down and then the ANC would be without the means of violence and rebellion.

SO: Sir, why were you not involved in the negotiations to transition?

RB: No, I was. But I suggest you ask Mr De Klerk what my contribution was. I also dealt with the complicated position of the TBVC states and the incorporation of Walvis Bay into Namibia. And I was often called by FW De Klerk to assist in finding solutions to the critical situations which threatened the continuation of negotiations.

SO: It is just that Magnus Malan reflected that it would have been enormously helpful if you had been more actively involved.

RB: The South African media wrote the same. For me, it was a huge compliment. Undeserved. They couldn't understand why the man who negotiated the trilateral agreement with Cuba and Angola – our worst enemies – couldn't be [involved with] the South African one. That would have meant that De Klerk would have had to appoint me as Minister of Constitutional Development. You can't do that without jeopardising the country's reaching out to the wide world: to convince that world that an irrevocable transformation is taking place which demands the rescinding of economic sanctions.

SO: It strikes me that you were still fulfilling a critical role between 1990 and 1994.

RB: De Klerk acknowledges it. Not so much in his book, but when there was a media debate on this issue, he wrote a letter reprimanding the media reporter Leopold Scholtz, who [had] said nobody could understand why De Klerk didn't use me as chief negotiator. And De Klerk came back and said that Pik Botha played a crucial role in assisting resolving the most critical crises. Being painfully aware of my own shortcomings and failures, I cannot allocate to myself any tributes.

SO: So what *did* you do?

RB: I took advantage of the transformation process. Namibia had just become independent, ending a 45-year-old international dispute. I wanted to expand my department. For the first time, [in] 1992-1993, I visited India. I visited Pakistan. This is when the fall of the Berlin Wall started to help us. The Russian bear was gone. Franz Josef Strauss played a major role. He was like Margaret Thatcher, who told us to dismantle apartheid and release Mandela.

He would come here, [and] PW Botha would receive him with open arms. But he would say, "Release Mandela." When PW Botha and I went to his funeral in Germany, we were urged to release Mandela. PW Botha decided to send the South African Deputy President to Kohl without telling me; secretly, telling him [Kohl] that he, PW Botha, would release Mandela on parole. Kohl rejected PW Botha's intention to release Mandela on parole saying the German Government insists on his unconditional release. Margaret Thatcher also insisted on Mandela's release, but made it clear she opposed violence as a means of achieving a political objective. Thatcher's view was, "Release him", and at the same time, telling the ANC, "I will oppose any solution based on violence as a means of achieving your objective." I used those words in everything I wrote. They were *her* words, and I made them mine. I would come back and say to PW Botha, "these seven points will impress Margaret."

SO: And what was your reaction to Ronald Reagan's predicament with Congress?

RB: After the triple Anti-Apartheid Act was passed by Congress, he vetoed it and Congress overruled it. Margaret was the last: the only one. So, I reminded her of the 7 points, hoping that that would persuade her to stick to her basic point of view. And she enabled me to persuade my colleagues to agree with this.

SO: How useful was your Embassy in London in keeping that link alive?

RB: Dr Dennis Worrall, our Ambassador in London, assisted me tremendously in making the EPG visit possible. He was a great supporter of the EPG. We were continuously engaged in telephone conversations, with me whispering to him things which he would whisper to Margaret or her go-between. I would say, "Tell the Prime Minister there will be a letter coming from PW, and she mustn't get upset if there are one or two sentences which might not be clear. I appeal to her to react positively."

SO: This is classic backchannel diplomacy. Feeding messages through.

RB: The issue at stake was important to me. This was the 'breaking-through', admitting the wrong of apartheid internationally. And, because we didn't succeed then in 1986 in implementing the EPG's proposal, [it] doesn't mean that it died. It then meant, it is there. So, the moment we met the ANC we could immediately fall back onto this. This is my point, and why I've said how important this is for me in what later followed. The moment we agreed tri-laterally with Cuba and Angola, and [the] withdrawal of troops, independence for Namibia, elections for Namibia...those 1st April events 1989...opened up everything. When Mandela was released in February 1990, we were immediately ready to start negotiations on the basis of the EPG concept. If we had... [If it was] for the first time, for the party to go into caucus to try and get this approved in 1990, we would have sat there for months quarrelling.

When Boipatong happened in June 1992, the ANC withdrew from negotiations. The Security Council had a meeting on violence in South Africa; Mbeki and Mandela went there. I went there. It was my last Security Council meeting. For the first time in decades, the Security Council did not pass a resolution reprimanding or condemning the South Africa Government but [one] urging all parties to resolve their differences peacefully. For me, it was a

tremendous moment in my life. Then they dispatched Cyrus Vance, former US Secretary of State as special representative of the Secretary General of the UN, to visit South Africa. The first person he came to see was me. Cyrus and I had got along quite well during the years of the Carter regime. He eventually resigned because he warned Carter against sending in the military rescue mission to Tehran in April 1980. I was completely open with him. I told him about the pitfalls and problems we had to face. At that stage, it was my idea to agree to a general amnesty to all ANC terrorists or freedom fighters, all South African police and military. He then went to see Mbeki. Mbeki supported my proposal. I then phoned De Klerk. He said, "Pik, it is not your portfolio. It is Coetzee's, the Minister of Justice." So, I phoned Coetzee, and he said, "Oh no, no! There must be proper investigations on all sides, and we will classify the various offences according to their seriousness." I said, "This is our major chance to remove at least one stumbling block from the agenda of our negotiations. General amnesty for all forces, but a tribunal that would decide on compensation for the families of the victims." Coetzee was hesitant. He would need time to consider this. Thabo again – later, in New York – phoned me and said, "Pik, I'm getting resistance in the ANC, you'd better hurry up." I again tried to push, but nothing came of it. And up to the present day, the chagrin of the ex-military and police personnel knows no bounds because of that. The TRC would have come into being, but it would have had a different role. The emphasis would have shifted from finding the guilty ones, to compensating the victims who suffered. Coetzee stood in the way. Mandela was his private prisoner: he wanted to take the applause and the credit. This is why I was never informed of Mandela's wish to see me.

So, although the EPG 'Possible Negotiating Concept' was not immediately implemented, it was indeed implemented four years later.

SO: Sir, I have a counter-factual question coming out of the conference I've just attended on the history of the South African nuclear programme. If the EPG had been successful in laying down the Negotiating Concept – if you had been able to persuade your more resistant colleagues in Cabinet, within the State Security Council to release Mandela, etc. – you would still have had the issue of the South African nuclear programme. Surely that would have complicated negotiations with the ANC?

RB: No, because we carried on independently from the ANC for many years as regards this subject. We kept the Americans at bay. They kept their pressure on us for years to sign the NPT. The deterrent effect, whatever it was, disappeared once we had signed the trilateral agreement with Cuba and Angola on 22nd December 1988. It paved the way for Mandela's release. There was no reason any longer for harbouring the deterrent effect of nuclear weapons. Hence my request to De Klerk in August 1989: Mandela's release and the dismantling of nuclear weapons should be our highest priority. He agreed, saying I need not try to convince him as he shared my views.

SO: So, as far as you were concerned, the possibility of an ANC government with nuclear capability was not part of your concerns, or the scenarios around decommissioning?

RB: Some of my officials – after a lunch with the Americans, with Cohen, Deputy Secretary of State for African Affairs – reported to me [that] the Americans

were saying, “You’d better sign the NPT now because we all know the ANC would come to power, and, unless you do, Gaddafi will inherit it.” Cohen denied that any of his officials would have made such a remark.

From my point of view, I knew that the doors of the world were opening for us to enter, after years of being the pariah of the world. Hence my visits also to Pakistan, India, Iraq, Iran, Qatar, and Kuwait, all before the ANC took over.

SO: Were these visits the results of invitations to you, or the result of your consistent drive to open up South Africa?

RB: The moment we had made such advances – once we had started negotiating with the ANC – the whole world’s attitude changed. And I was welcome. I could make contact. I even went to China. For many years I maintained friendship with Houphouet Boigny of Ivory Coast, Arap Moi of Kenya, Bongo of Gabon, Sir Seretse Khama of Botswana, Abdou Diouf of Senegal and others. For years, embassies were not formally opened, but they all started to open interest offices with the same privileges as diplomats. We opened up the doors during the removal of the apartheid years.²

SO: Was India such an innovative step for you? You talk of South Africa’s contacts elsewhere in Africa – below official diplomatic level – but was there an India backdoor or backchannel during your time as Foreign Minister?

RB: On occasion, yes. I had already appointed a South African Indian in a very senior position in my department, and there were Indian businessmen with whom there was continuous contact. I would not like to mention names, because some of them are still there. If you look at the statistics today, whenever opinion polls are made, you will find that the whites, the Indians and the coloureds basically agree on all important aspects of this country. On the black side, the gap is narrowing. Sooner or later, a majority of South Africans will vote for the party whose policies stand the best chance of promoting the well-being of our people irrespective of the colour of your skin. The votes are going steadily against the ANC. It is essential that the ANC – as part of the apartheid legacy – should change. Then South Africa can look forward to a new era in which the sharing of the same values becomes the driving force and not membership of a race.

SO: Sir, please could I take you back to Mrs Thatcher’s visit to Windhoek, Namibia, in April 1989?

RB: Margaret Thatcher demonstrated that a woman could equal and exceed the highest qualities of leadership of any man. From 1979 to 1990, she made a

² Cf. The presentation given by Vic Zazeraj, Private Assistant to Pik Botha (1981-86) and Director of Foreign Ministry (1993-95), to *The History of South Africa’s Nuclear Programme* Conference held in Intundla, South Africa, 9-10 December 2012: “In the first half of the 1990s, Mr Botha received literally dozens of diplomats and special envoys, many from countries with whom South Africa did not have formal relations. I participated in most of those meetings, and often received delegations in my own office when the Minister was not available. Their Governments were considering opening Embassies in Pretoria, and lifting all forms of punitive sanctions, on condition they could be persuaded that the process of change in South Africa was irreversible. Everything hung on the word ‘irreversible’. Our response was that, from the Government’s point of view, there was no way the process could be reversed: there was no Plan B, and no going back to the past from which we had just emerged. We made the point, however, that the National Party Government was not the only party to the negotiations, and could not speak on behalf of the ANC or any of the other parties. In the event, many countries proceeded with the lifting of sanctions and opening diplomatic missions in Pretoria well before the elections of 1994.”

positive contribution to stem war and devastation in Southern Africa, and [to] promoting peaceful negotiations. Rhodesia/Zimbabwe, South West Africa/Namibia, Angola, Mozambique, the Nkomati Accord, PW Botha's visit to European countries, the visit to South Africa of the Eminent Persons Group of the Commonwealth, the Coventry Four case... She had a hand in all of them.

She strongly condemned apartheid, but was also opposed to economic sanctions on the grounds that it would negatively influence the progress and prosperity of everyone in this country: in particular, of our Black people. She encouraged negotiations with the ANC and made a greater contribution to the release of Nelson Mandela than any other leader or organisation. Everyone in South Africa was on the 'benefit end' of her actions.

In my numerous meetings with her over a period of many years, perhaps the most momentous one was at the Windhoek Airport on 1 April 1989.

On 31 March 1989 – on the eve of the implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 435 and the beginning of the election in Namibia – General Magnus Malan and I had dinner with Louis Pienaar, the Administrator General of SWA/Namibia, and Martii Ahtisaari, the UN's Special Representative. Having been directly involved in the intractable dispute over South West Africa for 26 years, this dinner was – for me – an unsurpassed historical occasion: deeply personal, mental and spiritual. The way could now be paved for the release of Nelson Mandela, saving our country from destruction by entering into peaceful negotiations with the ANC, with a view to a new constitutional democratic future for South Africa.

While at the table, a senior official brought me a message that SWAPO fighters would slip across the border the following day in order to establish bases in Namibia. Under the agreements at that time, South African troops were confined to [the] barracks, under the supervision of UNTAG (United Nations Transition Assistance Group). I told Ahtisaari [that] I had received information that SWAPO was planning an incursion from Angola. He said it made no sense. From midnight, he said, the implementation of Resolution 435 – for which we had struggled for so many years – would begin. The whole UN and the whole world was looking forward to it. For SWAPO to attempt something like this at such a critical moment would make no sense at all. His words were: "They can achieve nothing by doing this. As a matter of fact, they will cause severe damage to themselves. This would be totally unacceptable." For that reason, he did not believe it could be true.

I undertook to test my sources again. "I must tell you", I warned Ahtisaari, "that all of us must be on the lookout and on our guard. You must admit that it is at least a possibility."

Hours later, the possibility became the reality. In the early morning hours of Saturday, 1 April, hundreds – which later grew to two thousand – SWAPO insurgents crossed the Namibian border, probably following the example of the ZAPU and ZANU invasion of Zimbabwe from Mozambique not long before the elections of 1980.

Margaret Thatcher was on an African tour and was scheduled to visit the British component of UNTAG in Namibia that afternoon. I was to meet her for consultations later that afternoon at the Windhoek Airport. A local farmer had invited me for an early lunch. From there, we would take the gravel road to the airport. After lunch, I went to admire the rose garden of my hostess, which covered almost a quarter of a hectare. I told her that, within an hour or two, I would be meeting Margaret Thatcher, and would she mind letting me have a rose or two that I could give to the British Prime Minister? My hostess immediately picked three or four dozen of the most beautiful roses, wrapped them in elegant paper, tied a ribbon around them, and added a little card on which I wrote a message for Mrs Thatcher. My party and I then departed for the airport in separate cars. The car in which my Private Secretary, Gerrit Pretorius, and Dieter Petzch from our Windhoek office were travelling was a long way behind us, and on a corner it rolled. Fortunately, they were not hurt, but the roses were destroyed. When they eventually caught up with us, I asked them to go immediately to Windhoek to buy roses.

Shortly thereafter, Margaret Thatcher and Sir Denis arrived. The Iron Lady wore a light-checked tweed suit and a white blouse, with a large cameo pinned to her left shoulder. I told her news had reached me that SWAPO had launched a large-scale incursion – possibly thousands – across the border. We found ourselves in a serious crisis. Unfortunately, this was not a 1 April joke, but most certainly a 1 April tragedy. We would have to authorise our troops to move out from their barracks. But, she said, “Under no circumstances must you break any of the provisions internationally agreed upon.” I replied, “But Madam Prime Minister, can’t you consider for a moment the seriousness of the situation? They are coming across the border in large numbers! If the troops are not allowed to leave their barracks, the farmers south of the Ovambo might organise their own defence and we might be heading for an internal civil war, destroying any prospect for Resolution 435.”

She was undeterred: “You will put yourself out in the cold as the violators of the agreement.” It could only be done with the authorisation of the Secretary General of the United Nations. I called Ahtisaari and said, “What I told you last night has now happened. Can we release our troops?” He said no, De Cuellar, the Secretary General, would have to approve. Mrs Thatcher was sitting a couple of metres from the phone and heard everything I was saying. She encouraged me, and gave me some helpful advice.

De Cuellar said he could not give approval. Only the Security Council could do that. I asked him how long that would take. He said quite a while – easily twelve hours. I told him that we had virtually no time before we would likely land in a situation that would completely undo Resolution 435. De Cuellar’s response was that I should discuss it again with Ahtisaari. Ahtisaari said he could not budge: “I cannot take decisions which deviate from the agreed provisions.”

I looked at Mrs Thatcher: “The dam wall is going to break. And if it breaks, it will be the end of Resolution 435.” She replied that I had to get permission, otherwise all would be lost, in any case. Call De Cuellar again, she suggested.

This time I said to De Cuellar, "Will you subsequently tell the world that I phoned you and asked for authorisation, but you were hesitant and declined? And, as a result, Resolution 435 and all the work of many years is now heading for a breakdown? Surely you would not want me to say this to the media. I assume you would not want this to happen. I am sure you will agree that the SWAPO invasion must be stopped. You can explain to the Security Council that the South African troops would return to their barracks." My impression was that he did not object, and I thanked him for his approval and put the phone down. I said to Mrs Thatcher, "De Cuellar did not object. So, we are releasing our troops." She seemed rather pleased.

In the meantime my staff had returned from their rose-buying mission. In the whole of Windhoek, on this historic Saturday, all they could find was a couple of red roses. With the roses in hand, I took Mrs Thatcher by the arm and escorted her to her aircraft. At the steps of the plane I handed her the roses and kissed her on the cheek. Denis, her husband, touched my sleeve and jokingly remarked, "Bear in mind, she is my wife, not yours."

On 4 April, she answered a question in the British House of Commons with the following statement: "There has been no provision in the United Nations plan for SWAPO to have bases in Namibia. Indeed, SWAPO committed themselves to the Geneva Accord under which they are required to stay north of the 16th parallel in Angola. It is a breach by SWAPO which has led to the most regrettable fighting and loss of life. I would emphasise that the South African units involved are acting with the full authority of the United Nations. It is now important that the authority be upheld and the agreements implemented in full."

SO: What was Mrs Thatcher's particular contribution to transition from apartheid, and her attitude to South Africa from 1989? I do know she argued forcefully that Buthelezi and Inkatha should be part of the negotiating process. And she was also presenting to her officials ideas on whether South Africa should be a unitary state, or whether it should be a federal entity. Were you aware of these ideas? Did you argue backwards and forwards on this?

RB: The ANC was largely for a Soviet model: a centralised arrangement of power. We were never against a broadly based federal system, but Buthelezi's original ideas were – as we understood it – for individual provinces which would have enjoyed almost independence with a very weak central government. Perhaps Switzerland is an example of this? We couldn't support this.

SO: Were you aware of Mrs Thatcher's views on this?

RB: We were aware. Thatcher never agreed with a federal system where the individual states had power bordering on independence.

SO: But she was arguing for a certain degree of devolution of power.

RB: We did so in the end. We never envisaged this would be the weak spot in the constitution. We got used to Mandela and Walter Sisulu's style and values. We thought that the need for the large-scale training and education of our

Black people would have been engrained in the ANC. Unfortunately, it wasn't. We would not have agreed at the time to the constitution if the ANC had told us that they would institute a racial quota under Black Economic Empowerment (BEE), which benefitted a relatively small number of Blacks, depriving the majority of proper technical and craftsmanship training and education. We are still not reaching out efficiently to the poor people of this country. Social grants will not resolve the problem. Training and education will. It is not widely known that, before the end of apartheid, we had reached the same per capita expenditure for education for whites and blacks. We had in mind a massive education and training programme for blacks, knowing that this was the key for stability, progress and economic growth. Mandela, in his opening speech when we first met in May 1990, told us about our own history. He revealed an immensely correct knowledge of our history and the Anglo-Boer war, expressing his sorrow at the suffering of the Afrikaners, but posed the question why we did not reach out to our Black compatriots when we succeeded to emerge from our poverty. That challenge remains.

SO: Did he refer, at the time, to the parallel suffering of Africans during the Anglo-Boer war?

RB: I am not sure that he mentioned it but I believe that he knows that 20,000 blacks died in concentration camps, as well as 34,000 Afrikaner women and children. Mandela said, "You succeeded in emerging from your own poverty and deprivation, but I don't understand, when you emerged from this and started to achieve, why did you not reach out to your black brothers?" We couldn't answer him. That is the greatest mistake made by us. Our trauma suffered in the Anglo-Boer War and our wish to have our own anthem and flag and not to have the British monarch as our sovereign any more was so strong that it blinded us to the immensely sinful and reprehensible policies [employed] to achieve that which we wanted to achieve – and it was almost disastrous. It remains a haunting question, even now. Why does the Government not reach out properly to the poor? Why the dearth in public deliveries, inadequate health services and education, increase in crime and corruption?

SO: You conjure a powerful image of an Afrikaner sense of "our country, our nation, our flag". But you had achieved this by 1961, with the creation of the Republic.

RB: But the ANC was almost in a state of war with us by then. The ANC had tried to hold meetings with Verwoerd, but Verwoerd turned them down. They then had the excuse that they had no other way out but to resort to violence. Mandela displayed extensive knowledge of our history. He had studied in prison, and later had been allowed to read the newspapers. So, he had read in the papers when I said that, someday, South Africa would have a black President and I would be content to serve under him.

SO: What was your view when South Africa did ask to re-join the Commonwealth? I know you were Minister of Mineral and Energy Affairs by then.

RB: I remember my reaction, and it is still my reaction. I do not know whether there is much to gain from it. But I admit the EPG played a meaningful role. I

would welcome a more positive role, particularly as the UNO appears now to be so weak. While the Cold War lasted... Yes, we nearly faced a nuclear war during the Cuban missile crisis, but there was a recognition and acknowledgement that we'd better not use nuclear arms against each other. So, the whole world had an unsavoury but stable international relationship. With the ending of the Cold War, we are now faced with regional conflicts which seem uncontrollable. Don't forget about the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, Iran, the catastrophic Iraq invasion, North Korea, the global economic collapse, climate change...

SO: Do you see any analogy between South Africa's development of nuclear capability and what Iran is currently trying to do? That is, pushing forward with a nuclear energy programme – possibly more, we don't know – with a dysfunctional political system, a regime which is increasingly isolated by the international community.

RB: The world is facing several potentially disastrous events, involving Syria, Afghanistan, North Korea, Iran – unpredictable – and Israel/Palestine.

SO: Surely international sanctions make them [re: North Korea and Iran] more unpredictable?

RB: When Saddam Hussein was still there [in Iraq], Hans Blix was completing his report for the UNSC shortly before Secretary of State Colin Powell made his invasion announcement. I discussed this with Mr Mandela before it happened. I asked him, what did he think if Dr Waldo Stumpf – who was the head of our Atomic Energy Board, the man who technologically assisted in demolishing our nuclear weapons and enabling us to sign the NPT – and I should meet Saddam Hussein. I had already discussed this with Stumpf. He [Mr. Mandela] wanted to know how would we approach the matter with Hussein. I then explained to him the history of our decommissioning, and my belief that, if I explained we came with Mr Mandela's support and backing, then Stumpf and I could tell Hussein we had been in a similar position. We would say, "We do not know whether you have WMD, but if you do not have it, we have experts who will then know how – if you will allow us – to do inspections and we will report to the Americans that they are making a mistake. Should you have it, and you have not heard our story and how this gained for us international applause, we have the know-how to assist in dismantling. And to dismantle in such a way that you will gain positive results worldwide." Mandela immediately said, "Pik, please, you can tell him that I urged the two of you to meet with him and that I recommend that he follows South Africa's example." I then phoned the Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs, who said he would bring it to the Minister's attention.

Apparently, the Department had a meeting with Stumpf and they were planning to send officials to discuss the matter with Iraqi officials. When Saddam Hussein was ruling Iraq and you wanted to have a decision, you had to see him. Anybody underneath him was of little importance. Nothing came of it. I phoned Hans Blix – he was drafting his report – and said, please go ahead. You have my blessing. I had known Mr Blix since our meeting in February 1994, shortly before our election, when I handed him that little plough made from the shell casing, with those words from Isaiah, "change your swords into ploughshares."

I don't say that Stumpf and I would have succeeded, but with Mandela's authority, I think there might have been at least a chance. I regret that the endeavour came to nought.

SO: Between 1990-1994, in those tough years of negotiations against the backdrop of violence and the need to sustain hope of a peaceful transition, did John Major play in any way a comparable role to Mrs Thatcher? Or did the Commonwealth, in any way, contribute to the process – through the offer of financial support, developmental funds, legal advice and support in constitution making?

RB: Robin Renwick, an outstanding British ambassador, played a positive role – no question about that. Robin Renwick was trusted by us and Mandela. At one of De Klerk's functions in the Cape – before we sat down to the formal dinner, which I hate so much! – I pulled him aside and told him, "In your book [*Unconventional Diplomacy in South Africa*, published in 1997], you made some rather unflattering remarks about me!" Renwick said, "No, no, you are reading it wrong. You know how much I supported you, and how much you meant to me. Big friends!" At the time, he would come to me and say to me, "I want to warn you against this or that," and, "Have you a message I can pass on to London?" And I would give him one. He would bring back one. I cannot quantify the amount of assistance he gave me, nor the volume; but the quality of it was good. How much it contributed, I can't tell you. As Ambassador, he had a direct line to Margaret Thatcher. John Major as British Prime Minister, in comparison, was a vacuum. When Margaret went, it was like losing those horses pulling a cart. If you lose those who really pull, you are stuck.

You will recall that I requested you to approach Carrington to find out whether he thought that Blair would receive me, to listen to my proposal for selecting a reliable institution like the South African Reserve Bank to act as paymaster to the white farmers who were being deprived of their land and, also, to obtain Mugabe's blessing – creating a win-win situation for Blair, Mugabe, the farmers and South Africa. It was really a great disappointment. He thought that Blair would not even consider such a proposal. He thought, "No hope." Mugabe would probably have agreed. I have met him on more than one occasion. When there was an invasion of Lesotho by some of their forces, soon after Mandela's release, we had a crisis on our hands. I arranged for De Klerk, myself and Mandela to meet with Mugabe and the President of Botswana in Gaborone. He was like a friendly brother to us. He and Mandela supported our ideas on how to curb this. I didn't want South African troops to be in there. The moment I suggested we could use Botswana, Zambian or Zimbabwean troops instead, it was, "Oh, no!" Suddenly we became the good fairies. After that meeting, De Klerk and I saw Mugabe alone for a lengthy meeting, in which we asked him to consider the release of the men who were found guilty of planting a bomb near an ANC office, killing a man. They were employed by some or other of the branches of the South African security forces. They got death sentences, which were later commuted to life sentences. Could he consider their release, now Mandela had been released? "Yes, yes, certainly, when Christmas comes," [he said]. "I normally release a number of prisoners. They will be included." But nothing came of it. After Mandela became President, I went to him and explained this to him. While I was still with him, he asked his secretary to put him through to

Mugabe: "Robert, this is Nelson Mandela, your brother." After their conversation, Mandela said to me, "Pik, we must just wait for Christmas. He is going to release a number of prisoners and our four would be included." Nothing came of this for years. Eventually, I approached the president of an African country, Sam Nujome, as one who still had an entrée and influence with Mugabe. I believe that his effort led to their release some time later on.

In my career, I have learned a lot of lessons. An important one is that, if you could reach or discover a balance of interest between two opponents, the dispute could be settled peacefully. The basic requirement is that the motives driving your opponent must be clinically studied. With the Cubans, at our meeting in Cairo in June 1988, after a severe clash at the opening meeting, I said to Risquet, we could both be winners. At first, he thought it was a joke, but turned around and asked me to explain what I meant. There is still a role for personal negotiation.

SO: Your style of diplomacy, then, was to look for and use the edges around formal diplomacy: over a drink, say, "Look, we can do this", creating that personal space. Geoffrey Howe, in his autobiography, talks about coming here to South Africa, meeting you away from your officials, over a drink. The space around the edges of formal meetings seems to have been so important. And particularly, for the Commonwealth, the policy 'space' it offers.

Sir, what has been your approach to life, as a politician and a diplomat?

RB: This poem by TS Eliot encapsulates it:

[Reads 'Burnt Norton' from *Four Quartets*]

*Time present and time past
Are both perhaps present in time future,
And time future contained in time past.
If all time is eternally present
All time is unredeemable.
What might have been is an abstraction
Remaining a perpetual possibility
Only in a world of speculation
What might have been and what has been
Point to one end, which is always present.*

SO: Sir, thank you very much indeed for talking to me.

[END OF AUDIOFILE]