

Mandela calls for action on poverty on 90th birthday

From his ancestral home in South Africa's impoverished Eastern Cape province, former president Nelson Mandela used the occasion of his 90th birthday Friday to call for renewed action on poverty.

'Poverty has gripped our people. If you are poor, you are not likely to live long,' South Africa's favourite son said in his home village of Qunu, where he was celebrating his birthday weekend with family and friends.

Surrounded by some of his grandchildren, a smiling Mandela, wearing one of his trademark African patterned shirts, posed for photographs in the lounge of the sprawling bungalow he built on his release from prison among the rolling hills of his homeland.

'There are many people in South Africa who are rich, and who can share those riches with those not so fortunate, who have not been able to conquer poverty,' said Mandela, who came to power in 1994 promising a 'better life for all'.

On receiving a birthday kiss and flowers from one of his granddaughters, Mandela, accompanied by his third wife, former Mozambican first lady Graca Machel, was asked whether he wished he had spent more time with his family.

'I am sure for many people that is their wish. I also have that wish that I spent more time (with family). But I don't regret it,' the anti-apartheid icon, who spent 27 years in prison, said.

Qunu, a rural backwater of thatched huts and subsistence farmers, where Mandela spent his early years herding cattle and roasting corn-on-the-cob under the open skies, was abuzz with preparations for the main birthday bash Saturday for about 500 friends and family.

Friday also marks the 10th anniversary of Mandela's marriage to Machel, a social activist and widow of former Mozambican president Samora Machel.

Throughout the day, messages of affection for Madiba (Mandela clan name by which he is commonly called) poured in from around the country and abroad, with only a few critical voices lamenting the 'Mandela mania' as excessive.

In one of the most generous tributes, Mandela's predecessor as president, F. W. de Klerk, who was jointly awarded the Nobel Peace Prize with him in 1993, called him one of the greatest figures of the 20th century and a born leader of 'aristocratic' bearing.

His successor, Thabo Mbeki, whose aloof leadership style has drawn unfavourable comparisons with Mandela's gregarious manner, said South Africans basked in the reflected glory of Mandela 'and other giants' of the anti-apartheid struggle but should also consider the mission facing theirs and future generations.

The president of world football body FIFA, Sepp Blatter, also had kind words for Mandela in a message that appeared designed to ease concerns about FIFA's commitment to South Africa hosting the 2010 World Cup.

'You are the epitome of grace and dignity; a man with determination to overcome even the greatest odds and this is what FIFA is sure South Africa will deliver to the world in 2010,' he said in a video message.

The European Union (EU) also paid tributes to Nelson Mandela on his birthday, with European Commission President Jose Manuel Barroso describing the former South African president as a 'source of inspiration for generations of Africans and world citizens'.

'His life illustrates the power of the will, of courage, the power of freedom and also the force of reconciliation,' the head of the EU executive said.

Prisoners at the Drakenstein Correctional Centre, formerly Victor Verster Prison, from which he emerged a free man on February 11, 1990, had a party and songs in his honour.

But Mandela's birthday, also brought expressions of concern about the durability of his legacy.

As Business Day newspaper noted, referring to recent remarks from a youth leader of Mandela's African National Congress vowing he would 'kill' in support of ANC president Jacob Zuma, Mandela's 'long walk' to a mature democracy was not yet at an end.

On Friday, the wizened nonagenarian called on South Africa's youth to behave with the discipline which he said had allowed him to reach 90.

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