

# South Africans Host Mideast Peace Talks

by Lydia Cherry

A three-day meeting between Israeli and Palestinian delegations was held on Jan. 9-11, in South Africa's Western Cape. It was hosted by South African President Thabo Mbeki and former National Party ministers who played crucial roles in what is dubbed "the South African miracle"—the peaceful end of apartheid—of the early 1990s. The spokesman for the Israeli delegation, Yossi Beilin, Justice Minister in the Barak government and an architect of the Oslo Accords, noted upon leaving that there had not "been a meeting on such a level between Israelis and Palestinians for a long time." Beilin judged that "the meeting set a precedent for us. We never had it before. I think it comes from a belief that the longest conflict since World War II should be resolved."

"A resolution of this long-standing conflict is possible," insisted President Mbeki as the "retreat" ended. Mbeki noted that President George Bush had asked for a report on the meeting, and that the U.S. government had given its support to the peace initiative. Making clear that he was willing continue on this track in any way he was needed, including traveling to the Middle East, Mbeki expressed his faith in a peaceful resolution based on the two-state (Israel and Palestine) route. He referred to the two peoples as very talented and said that both needed to recover their dignity.

The Palestinian delegation to the Western Cape retreat was headed by Dr. Saeb Erakat, who has been negotiating the interim, or transitional, agreement of the Oslo peace process with Israel since its signing in 1995, and has held the post of Minister of Local Government in the Palestinian Authority. Dr. Erakat made clear in his statements that Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat was in support of the talks hosted by the South Africans. Dr. Erakat said that after 15 months of funerals, siege, and "closure" in Palestine, "We had lost the ability to hope. . . . Coming here and listening to the great experiences of South Africa's process of negotiation and transformation has inspired us. . . . Also, what these three days demonstrated to me and my colleagues was that a peaceful solution is possible."

A joint communiqué specified the following "South African insights relevant to the Middle East": 1) The conflict could not be resolved through violent and military means, and the only guarantee for stability and security was peace; 2) The

maintenance of effective channels of communications at all times and under all circumstances was vital; 3) There was a need to take into consideration the fears and concerns of "the other side," and to engage seriously with them; 4) Negotiations should not be approached from the perspective of a winner or loser—"It is in each party's self-interest that its interlocutor is satisfied by any agreement reached"; and 5) The process should at no point be held hostage to extremists or their actions.

## Meeting Blacked Out by Western Media

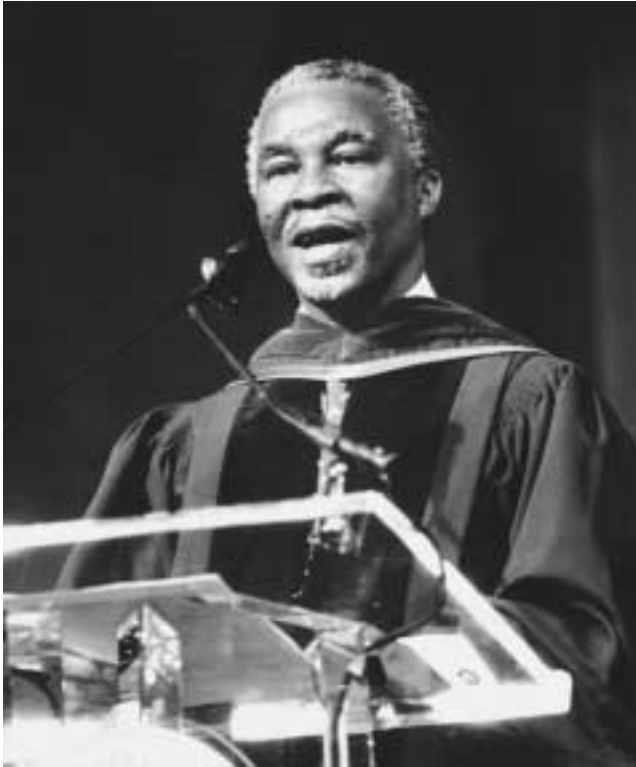
A newsworthy event? Not according to the major Western press organs and wire services, which acted in concert to black it out, while at the same time running wire stories *ad infinitum* geared to forcing South Africa to act against the Robert Mugabe government in next door Zimbabwe. Only the SAPA, South Africa's own newswire, reported on the occurrence of this high-level "retreat."

Instead, in the days leading up to the conference, on Jan. 5, United Press International ran a blistering attack on the South African government, for its supposed geopolitical shift toward the Muslim world and away from the "war against terrorism." Author R.W. Johnson, director of the South African Suzman Foundation, who periodically proposes in the British press that Africa should be recolonized because of the incompetence of its leaders, said that this "new revised policy" in South Africa was signalled by President Nelson Mandela "officially backing off from his support of President Bush in the wake of Sept. 11." Furthermore, Johnson insisted that the policy shift is the result of a conspiracy between the South African Communist Party (SACP) and the "Muslim Lobby"; they have hijacked foreign policy. "The new revised policy," intoned Johnson, "risks infuriating the Bush Administration in the hour of its triumph in Afghanistan." Johnson's geopolitical warning: "If the United States follows this phase of its campaign with a strike against Iraq, South Africa is now likely to be vocal in its criticism, at the head of a large Third World group."

Johnson is attempting to use the "red scare" in a period in which it no longer works, and leading government ministers in South Africa have always been SACP members, because the SACP, like the Congress of South African Trade Unions, is part of the tripartite alliance running the government.

## South Africa Tells Its Story

Before the meetings began, Pik Botha, foreign affairs minister in the Nationalist Party government of the early 1990s, stressed the similarities of the South African situation at the end of apartheid and the Middle East today. "While we wanted to cling to power through the use of violence, the ANC [African National Congress] wanted to take power through the use of violence. We finally all realized it was taking us nowhere. . . . This is a very difficult situation, but it is in the interest of the world to alleviate the war; we cannot



*South African President Thabo Mbeki, who spent three days in January with Israeli and Palestinian delegations. According to his biographer, "uniting the most disparate strands into a viable policy direction" has always been his greatest skill.*

move forward into the new millennium until there is peace in the Middle East. . . . All of us must lend a helping hand where we can."

The mini-summit was an initiative of President Mbeki, and he was strongly commended by both sides for mediating the meetings non-stop for the full three days. Biographers of Mbeki make clear that "uniting the most disparate strands into a viable policy direction" has always been his greatest skill. According to the biography written by Adrian Hadland and Jovial Rantao, it was Mbeki who framed the Harare Declaration in 1989, which was the first document to set out the ANC's strategic vision for a negotiated settlement; it was Mbeki who made the first major contacts with the Afrikaner elite; and it was Mbeki who brought into the government the white right wing, as well as the Zulu-based Inkatha Freedom Party. It was Mbeki who, after an ANC speaker at a Long Island conference in June 1986 threatened to shoot an Afrikaner member of the audience (one Pieter de Lange, chairman of the Broederbond), quietly arranged to meet with de Lange in his hotel room that evening. The chat turned into a marathon four-hour session, and at the end of it de Lange promised to do what he could to enhance reconciliation within South Africa. And upon his return to South Africa, de Lange followed through on his promise.

Although de Lange was not at the Western Cape retreat on Jan. 9-11, Roelf Meyer, the National Party's chief negotiator, was present, as was National Party minister Leon Wessels. Neil Barnard and Mike Louw, from the intelligence community, now retired, were also present.

Among the currently serving South African ministers at the Western Cape retreat was Minister for Water Affairs Ronnie Kasrils. Kasrils was among a number of prominent South African Jews to put out a statement early last December calling on the Israeli government to negotiate seriously with the Palestinians. He insisted that "Jewish survival and the fulfillment of Palestinian national aspirations are not mutually exclusive goals," and that "the security of Israelis and Palestinians is inseparably intertwined."

### **The Delegations**

Joining Beilin, who headed the Israeli delegation, were:

**Avraham Burg**, Speaker of the Fifteenth Knesset. In 1995, Burg was elected chairman of the executive of the Jewish Agency for Israel and the World Zionist Organization, and was one of the leaders of the protest movement against the war in Lebanon.

**Ambassador Reuven Merhav (ret.)**, who played a leading role in a team developing metropolitan and political options for a permanent status agreement in Jerusalem. In that capacity, former Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak called him to the July 2000 Camp David Summit for advice. Merhav is a member of the executive committee of the Council for Peace and Security, a non-partisan, public action group of members of the Israeli Defense Forces, intelligence community, and foreign affairs veterans and experts.

**Dr. Yair Hirschfeld**, Director General of the Tel Aviv-based Economic Cooperation Foundation (which he co-founded with Beilin), an organization developing comprehensive strategy toward regional peacemaking and reconciliation. In 1999-2000, Dr. Hirschfeld was a leading member of a trilateral Israeli-Palestinian-Jordanian working group on security issues.

**Haim Oron**, a member of the Knesset since 1988, and founding member of the Peace Now movement.

**Dr. Naomi Chazan**, Deputy Speaker of the Knesset, Hebrew University professor, and chair of the Harry S Truman Research Institute for the Advancement of Peace.

Backing up Dr. Erakat (who has been negotiating the peace process with Israeli since its signing in 1995) on the Palestinian side were:

**Dr. Nabil Qassis**, a nuclear physicist who is a Palestinian National Authority minister, in charge of the Bethlehem 2000 Project. He is the founder and director of the Palestine Economic Policy Research Institute, and one of the leaders in Palestinian negotiations with Israel since the 1990s.

**Ghaith Al-Omari** and **Rami Shehadeh**, legal advisers with the Negotiations Support Unit of the Negotiations Affairs Department of the Palestine Liberation Organization.