

Mandela To Go Free Today; De Klerk Proclaims Ending Of 'Chapter' After 27 Years

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CAPE TOWN, Feb. 10 — President F. W. de Klerk announced today that Nelson Mandela would be released from a prison outside Cape Town on Sunday afternoon, ending 27 and a half years of imprisonment for South Africa's most celebrated black leader.

Saying the release "will bring us to the end of a long chapter," Mr. de Klerk coupled his announcement with an appeal to the 71-year-old black leader to help steer the country toward a negotiated political settlement between whites and blacks.

His plea underscored the extraordinary influence that Mr. Mandela has exerted while serving a life sentence for conspiracy to overthrow the government and sabotage. Although he has spent more than half his adult life in jail, Mr. Mandela will emerge in a position that many South Africans have equated with that of Mr. de Klerk, the country's head of state.

When he walks out of prison, as he has evidently insisted on doing in rejecting more elaborate government proposals for the release, Mr. Mandela will do so as the virtually uncontested leader of millions of South African blacks.

This position, owed partly to his resolute refusal to compromise with the government during his imprisonment and partly to a powerful personality that even government leaders have acknowledged, was achieved even though ordinary South Africans have not heard his voice in a generation. Until tonight, when the government released a photograph of him meeting on Friday with Mr. de Klerk, they had not even seen what Mr. Mandela looked like since the last published photograph was taken in a prison garden in 1968.

Mr. de Klerk smiled frequently as he made the announcement, showing no effects from the angry attacks leveled by white conservatives since he told Parliament eight days ago that the government would release Mr. Mandela and lift its ban on the African National Congress.

He began by reading a brief statement outlining the government's decision to end the life term imposed on Mr. Mandela in the so-called Rivonia Trial. The sentence was handed down when the black leader was already serving a five-year term for a previous conviction.

"I am now in a position to announce that Mr. Nelson Mandela will be released at the Victor Verster Prison on Sunday, Feb. 11, 1990, at about 3 o' clock," President de Klerk said. He added, "We would all like Mr. Mandela's release to take place in a dignified and orderly manner."

The white leader said he had informed Mr. Mandela of his impending release at a meeting on Friday evening in Cape Town. Mr. de Klerk gave no indication of Mr. Mandela's reaction. Asked about the black leader's plans after leaving prison, he said he preferred not "to speak on behalf of Mr. Mandela," and that Mr. Mandela could make his own statement on Sunday.

Mr. de Klerk also said that the national state of emergency declared in July 1986 could be lifted soon if there was no upsurge of unrest. He voiced a willingness to negotiate the possible release of remaining political prisoners.

In recent talks with the government, Mr. Mandela has demanded freedom for all political prisoners and an end to the state of emergency.

The announcement of the release set off immediate rejoicing in black areas around the country. In Soweto, a black satellite city outside Johannesburg, Archbishop Desmond M. Tutu, southern Africa's Anglican primate and a Nobel Peace Prize winner, emerged from a meeting with Mr. Mandela's wife, Winnie, jumped in the air and shouted "Hoorah!" Speaking later in Johannesburg, Archbishop Tutu said Mr. de Klerk's decision was "mind boggling" and added: "F. W., you have done well. We want to congratulate you for the things you have done and the things you are going to do."

White conservatives reacted with dismay. Jakobus van der Merwe, the parliamentary spokesman for the opposition Conservative Party, which has challenged Mr. de Klerk to hold a white referendum on his reform program, said: "It's a joke. Mandela wins by a knockout. De Klerk is being carried away on a stretcher."

In Pretoria, members of a white neo-Nazi group, the Afrikaner Resistance Movement, chanted "Hang Mandela!" as they marched in protest to the Union Buildings, the government's administrative headquarters.

A personal respect for Mr. Mandela and a hope that he will prove a catalyst in bringing black leaders to the negotiating table was evident throughout Mr. de Klerk's 30-minute news conference at a government auditorium here. The news conference was

broadcast live in many other countries, including the United States, but was recorded and aired only in excerpts later on South Africa's state-owned television.

Mr. de Klerk, who was an unknown attorney in a provincial town when Mr. Mandela was sentenced to life in the Rivonia Trial on June 12, 1964, described the black leader as "friendly," "dignified" and "interesting," terms that would surely have shocked an earlier generation of white leaders who routinely referred to Mr. Mandela as a "communist" and a "terrorist."

Apparently anticipating still angrier denunciations from white conservatives, who have described him as a traitor for his effort to seek a political settlement with blacks, Mr. de Klerk added that the government was certain that it was acting correctly. "We are doing what we sincerely believe to be in the best interests of South Africa," he said.

The president's announcement followed a week of secretive maneuvering over conditions for the release since Mr. de Klerk's parliamentary speech, in which the white leader linked his pledge to free Mr. Mandela to other reforms. The moves amounted to the most far-reaching relaxation of policy since Mr. de Klerk's National Party predecessors won power in 1948 and set out to construct apartheid, a system of strict racial segregation and white domination that the government has now pledged to abandon.

In addition to removing the ban on the African National Congress, the country's leading black group fighting to overthrow white rule, Mr. de Klerk said on Feb. 2 that he would lift bans on the Pan-Africanist Congress and the South African Communist Party, abolish restrictions on scores of anti-apartheid leaders, and at least temporarily halt executions. He said the government was committed to building "a new democratic constitution" with a universal franchise, based on the principle of "no domination." He invited black leaders to join the government in negotiations to that end.

The interval between Mr. de Klerk's announcement of Mr. Mandela's forthcoming release and his statement today was taken up by discussions between the government and Mr. Mandela over arrangements. Officials had indicated that they preferred a carefully managed release, possibly including a joint appearance at a news conference by Mr. de Klerk and Mr. Mandela.

But it appeared that Mr. Mandela had set his own terms for the release, beginning with simply walking out of the jail in the hilly wine country outside Paarl, 35 miles northeast of Cape Town. Mr. de Klerk said that discussions on "suitable arrangements" for this were being held with the "parties concerned," but the government's role seems set to end the moment Mr. Mandela walked through the prison gates.

Shortly before midnight, lawyers for Mr. Mandela said he would allow photographs

to be taken as he leaves the prison, hold a news conference soon afterward and address a rally in his honor later in Cape Town.

The lawyers did not say whether Mr. Mandela would leave after the rally for the small brick house in Soweto he last saw in 1961. One report said he might remain in Cape Town for as long as two days.

It was evident from Mr. de Klerk's answers to journalists' questions that Mr. Mandela had declined any government role in protecting him.

The black leader's safety has been a matter of growing concern, partly because of threats from white extremists. Government officials have said he also might face violence at the hands of elements in the black resistance who denounced his decision three years ago to begin a series of secret contacts with the government.

Mr. de Klerk indicated that the issue was not discussed at the meeting Friday night between the two men, apparently because Mr. Mandela had already made it clear that he wanted no formal links or arrangements with the government. Once released, Mr. de Klerk said, Mr. Mandela "becomes a free man, and he doesn't owe it to me to inform me of his program. I have not asked him about it, either."

But striking one of the few somber moments in the news conference, the white leader said "there are all sorts of people" who might threaten Mr. Mandela's life. "I think radicals from the far left might be tempted to do so, and I think there is also a risk that it might come from radicalists from the right," he said. "With him having such a high profile I think this is a real risk."

In the past week, people claiming to speaking for Mr. Mandela, including his wife, have suggested that Mr. Mandela would not leave prison until a number of conditions previously set by the African National Congress, of which Mr. Mandela is a member, had been met.

But it appeared that Mr. Mandela and fellow congress leaders previously released after serving life terms with him, including Walter Sisulu, the 77-year-old former Secretary General of the congress, decided this week that the release should proceed without further haggling over terms.

As outlined by Mr. Sisulu and others, these mainly involved the release of people identified by the congress as political prisoners, about 350 of whom are said to be serving time in South African jails; a demand that all political exiles be free to return to South Africa without fear of arrest under laws governing "terrorism" and other anti-apartheid offenses; and a demand that the government lift the state of emergency it declared in 1986.

In his speech to Parliament, Mr. de Klerk said that the government would free all

those convicted of “purely political” offenses like membership in banned organizations, a step it has already begun to take, but not those convicted of “common law” crimes like murder. He also kept parts of the emergency regulations in force.

In Mr. Mandela’s contacts with the government — he met once previously with Mr. de Klerk, and once with the previous president, P. W. Botha, last July, as well as dozens of times with other government ministers — he is said to have insisted that the government meet the congress’s terms.

But today, Mr. de Klerk indicated that the two men had agreed that these issues could be deferred for future talks. He said he had emphasized to Mr. Mandela on Friday “the importance of creating conditions” that would allow him to lift the emergency, meaning an end to black unrest.

He also said that while the status of political prisoners and exiles should be left to “negotiations,” he had told Mr. Mandela that “exploratory discussions could take place in the meantime.”

Some of Mr. Mandela’s supporters had feared that a visit by the Rev. Jesse Jackson, the American civil rights leader, might prompt the government to delay the release. But Mr. Jackson said he would be on hand Sunday when the foremost champion of South Africa’s black majority walks out the prison door.