

Dakar: Symbolic Act and Protest

WHAT Dakar meant to me personally and whether the whole experience lived up to my expectations, are questions that can only be answered by looking at the reasons why I agreed in the first place to go on this trip.

It is sometimes difficult to analyse one's own motives for coming to an important decision, but in the case of the Dakar meeting with the ANC there is absolute clarity in my own mind as to why I accepted IDASA's invitation. I did it for three reasons:

1. As a 'symbolic act of protest against the South African government's unwillingness to sit down at the negotiation table with a political movement that is supported by the majority of the politically aware blacks in South Africa. I accepted it could not be more than a symbolic act, because the group that went to Dakar made no pretence of being powerbrokers or having a mandate of any sort.
2. At a previous meeting with the ANC in Lusaka I had the opportunity to speak to members of the ANC's National Executive on matters pertaining to the situation in the field of education. I wanted to renew those contacts and to move more specifically into the field of

politics, because they and those of us who were at Lusaka knew that the serious situation of education has its basic roots in South African politics.

3. Thirdly, and just as importantly, I wanted to see a part of Africa that I would have never been able to see unless drastic changes came about in South Africa.

My reasons also reflect the expectations that I had and, today, I can state in all honesty that Dakar, as far as I am concerned, succeeded beyond expectations.

1. Within my lifetime there has never been a symbolic act that I can recall that has made such an impact and has driven home the message it wished to convey as Dakar. Despite the efforts of the Nationalist press (and some others too) to ridicule and belittle Dakar the debate on the necessity of talks and negotiations with the ANC became the most talked about thing in South Africa. Weeks of hysterical reaction put paid to the idea that Dakar was an empty gesture.

As a symbolic act of protest it succeeded beyond expectations.

2. The in-depth talks with the ANC delegates at the conference and in private conversations created a more profound understanding of the issues at stake in South Africa. It clearly showed how all the spheres of life, politics, economics, education, culture, etc. hang together in such a way that there is no easy way out of our dilemma. Not to talk and not to negotiate on these matters with the ANC as fellow South Africans is in a sense an easy way out, but surely also a recipe for ultimate disaster.

3. I wanted to see West Africa and what an experience that was! Africa opened its arms in an unbelievable way to us, South Africans who were willing not only to totally reject apartheid (that is no longer so difficult these days, in theory at least), but also to opt for a non-racial democracy in a unitary South Africa. Africa needs us and wants to welcome us back in the fold where we rightly belong. We need Africa. What are we missing by being so stupidly obstreperous! Perhaps this is still Dakar's greatest lesson.

**Prof. J.J.F. Durand,
Vice-Rector, UWC.**

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Dr. F. van Zyl Slabbert and Mr. Thabo Mbeki (ANC Secretary for Presidential Affairs and Director of Information) seated centre, with (left to right) Prof. Jaap Durand, Dr. Andre Odendaal, Dr. Ampie Coetzee and Prof. Jakes Gerwel, all of the University of the Western Cape, gathered in Dakar.