



Under an ANC flag, Ahmed Kathrada and Walter Sisulu address supporters after their release Atrapix

Comrades in arms

The place was Addis Ababa. The date, January 1962. The occasion, the conference of the Pan-African Freedom Movement of East and Central Africa.

Before the conference was the African National Congress's Nelson Mandela, telling how, with the rest of South Africa, he 'had woken to read press reports of widespread sabotage involving the cutting of telephone wires and blowing up of power pylons' in October 1961.

He spoke of the first sabotage at-

Walter Sisulu and Ahmed Kathrada spent 27 years in prison for their involvement in the ANC's first wave of armed attacks in 1961. They explain to **JO-ANNE COLLINGE** the thinking behind the formation of Umkhonto we Sizwe, and the decision to engage in armed struggle.

tacks Umkhonto we Sizwe carried out simultaneously in Johannesburg, Port Elizabeth and Durban on 16 December

1961.

'It was now clear that this was a political demonstration of a formidable kind. It was still a small beginning because a government as strong and as aggressive as that of South Africa can never be induced to part with political power by bomb explosions in one night and in three cities only.

'But in a country where freedom fighters frequently pay with their very lives ... planned acts of sabotage against government installations introduced a new phase in the political situation and

are a demonstration of the people's unshakeable determination to win freedom whatever the cost may be'.

Nearly 29 years later, in the Orlando West home that has flashed across television screens worldwide, Walter Sisulu and his comrade and cell companion of many years, Ahmed Kathrada, reflect on the events that Mandela spoke of - almost distantly - back in Addis Ababa.

It is day 12 of their return to society after 26 years in jail. The fevered emotion of their first days back in the world is tempered. The crowds are gone and instead there is an intermittent flow of diplomats to greet the leaders. This morning the French and Portuguese ambassadors come to call. The ANC flag fluttering over the house already looks a little worn.

'It was a decision to start with sabotage, and at the time we were arrested (July 1963) Umkhonto was still engaged more in the question of sabotage. They were at that stage also training in guerilla warfare - but training for an *eventual* conflict', recalled Sisulu. This was what they had said during the Rivonia trial and it was true - not just a convenient defence, he said.

'We were aware that the effect of the pressure was not so strong as to get a regime like the South African regime to change. But at least it was going to educate the white public that danger was coming. This is what we wanted to highlight: that danger is coming, and unless something is done, an ultimate conflict - actually a shooting war - will take place.

'We started with sabotage as a way of educating propaganda. But at the same time, we were not so naive as to think that they would change - so we had to make proper preparations. That is what Nelson had gone out for - to get money, to arrange facilities for training'.

Kathrada, noting that he was not part of Umkhonto we Sizwe at the time of his arrest (although he had earlier been a member), added: 'I think I'm correct in recalling that the move toward guerilla warfare was going to be, firstly, a political decision by the political organisations. It was not going to be an



Walter Sisulu: MK was at all times guided by the political machinery

Umkhonto decision as such. And we (the political organisations) had not reached that decision yet'.

Sisulu elaborated: 'You see, the ANC and the South African Communist Party had given the go-ahead that the military wing - we didn't call it a military wing then - be formed. In other words, those of us who thought this could be done were immediately given the green light that we would be guided at all stages by the political organs.

'In Nelson's case, he was head of Umkhonto, and he was also really a political leader. When I was arrested, my own position was merely a political commissar, to guide them on political matters. There was regular contact between the ANC, Umkhonto and the Party'.

There was also ongoing debate about guerilla warfare, Sisulu remembered. 'Was it going to be urban, or was it going to be classical guerilla warfare? Up until the time we were arrested there was no clear idea as to what it would be. We were aware that logistically we were in a very difficult position and the country did not seem quite suitable for classical guerilla warfare.

'On the other hand, we knew the difficulties of urban guerilla warfare. At the time we were arrested that was the situation'.

Kathrada agreed that it was probably correct to term the early phase of armed struggle as 'armed propaganda'. Certainly, the idea was to avoid loss of

life. Furthermore, 'it was more symbolic really. There was no mass sabotage. There were few units operating - as you have gathered from reports.

'I suppose the idea at that stage was really to rally people towards the movement, and in the process to recruit people'.

The question of the early relationship between Umkhonto and the ANC was complex. Certainly, there was a great overlap of leadership and membership - although there were different eligibility criteria for the political and military structures. While the structures were to remain separate, Umkhonto was to take direction from the ANC executive. It proved to be a distinction that could not hold up under the pressures: on the one hand the need to propagate the cause, and on the other, the need to find resources for training and funding.

Said Sisulu: 'The idea was that Umkhonto should be directed by the executive of the ANC, but should appear as an independent machinery. At the time the ANC was not yet open to all groups. Umkhonto was immediately open to all (race) groups and it was the desire that it should remain so.

'But when Nelson went abroad our chaps would not listen to that (separation). They thought it was all nonsense and they wanted to link Umkhonto directly with the ANC. There wasn't much propaganda and they needed that'.

Unlike Mandela, who gave his famous address from the dock, Sisulu actually took the witness stand during the Rivonia trial and was subjected to cross-examination under oath. He made clear at the outset there were certain questions he would not answer - questions that implicated people not before the court. And he stuck to his position.

The one unanswered question that bothered the press at the time was whether Nobel Peace Prize winner and ANC president Albert Luthuli had been party to the decision to form Umkhonto.

As Kathrada and Sisulu discussed the question of dissension in the ranks of the political organisations on the decision to employ violence, Luthuli's position became clearer.



Ahmed Kathrada is hoisted high by comrades in Lenasia on the day of his release Eric Miller, Afrapix

'Rolley Arenstein and a certain group of people - a few in the executive - were opposed to the formation of Umkhonto, on the grounds that the time had not come', Sisulu said, laughing reminiscently at the 'big books of Lenin' that Arenstein used to carry with him.

But a distinction could be made, Kathrada added, between those who were totally opposed and those who felt more serious consideration should be given as to whether the bounds of political work had been reached.

'Kathy is making an important point. There were people who were in fact - not on the same grounds as Rolley - arguing this point, that you are rushing for something, and it is an escapist way, when in fact you could still do political work.

'It was a very powerful group that argued this point. Chief Luthuli belonged to that group. They did not appear to be completely opposed (to the formation of Umkhonto), but they were unhappy.

'But, on the other hand, there was a strong group that believed we needed this (resort to armed struggle), and that view prevailed. Without voting, the matter was being discussed. It was

examined objectively and it was clear that the majority felt that this method was accepted'.

Sisulu was apparently one of the majority whose view prevailed. 'Nelson and I were together underground during the strike (the three-day general strike at the time of the establishment of the Republic of South Africa in 1961). We were living together at that time. We were both convinced that the need for the military, for violence, was imperative.

'But Nelson, having had a report (incorrect, as it turned out) of the failure of the strike, was quick to make a statement to say this chapter is now closed. That agitated many minds, you see, because it was before discussion had taken place. The frustration was that a minor state of emergency was declared during that period - the army had been brought in, with Saracens (armoured cars)'.

Journalists described the military mobilisation in preparation for the strike as the biggest since the war. Something like 10 000 black people were arrested a week before the protest and kept in jail until it was over. Armoured vehicles patrolled the townships and meetings were banned. These were the

conditions that weighed against the organisation of peaceful mass action.

Kathrada said he had not opposed the formation of Umkhonto 'when it came to that', but had held the view that there was still scope for political work: 'It would take time. It would have been totally underground work, with small numbers. But the scope was there.

'Other countries have gone through much worse periods and continued with political work. But as Walter has pointed out, consultation had become virtually impossible because of the bannings, because people had left the country'.

Kathrada himself, having left the Umkhonto structures, was living disguised as a Portuguese man in a cottage in the northern Johannesburg suburb of Mountainview at the time of his arrest. He was working for the Indian Congress, for the SACP of which he was a member, and for the ANC, although technically he was not a member of the organisation at that stage.

'The work entailed mostly contact, meetings and propaganda work. We were setting up Radio Freedom and Walter had already made his first broadcast. I was supposed to make the sec-

ond one. We had just started this sort of underground work, just started making contact and held a few meetings - and we got caught'.

Sisulu's broadcast was made on 26 June 1963 - just a fortnight before the raid on Lilliesleaf Farm.

His address was a short rallying call - using the form of address made so familiar in the years of his absence by Albertina Sisulu, 'sons and daughters of Africa'.

He referred briefly over Radio Freedom to the sabotage campaign. 'In the face of violence, men struggling for freedom have had to meet violence with violence. How can it be otherwise in South Africa? Changes must come. Changes for the better, but not without sacrifice. My sacrifice. Your sacrifice'.

The words, as it turned out were prophetic. The raid on Lilliesleaf Farm took place on 11 July and the six people meeting there - including Kathrada and Sisulu - were detained. A mass of documents - including the military plan, Operation Mayibuye - was found. Eventually, nine went on trial for sabotage and eight were sentenced to life imprisonment.

Kathrada, with his passion for accuracy, honed by years of studying history in jail, points out that Lilliesleaf was not MK headquarters as the press insist. It was a place bought to accommodate political activists who had been forced underground. It was temporar-

ily used to accommodate some Umkhonto men who had been for training - but it was considered a security risk to mix them with political leaders and they were moved on to a second farm, Trevallyn.

Soon after the arrests, the ANC issued a pamphlet which appealed to the people: 'Let us show the world we are not terrorised, not passive, not indifferent, not idle. Let us raise a cry that will echo round the world - FREE THESE LEADERS!'

The document concluded: 'White man - you are on trial before the eyes of the world. What is there left for you to plead?'

Kathrada recalls the militancy at the time of their trial in 1964 - the thousands who stood outside the court building on the day of sentencing. Then he recalls the 'lull' when the earlier urgings of the ANC seemed to have been swept away in the storm.

The impact of repression struck him forcibly when he returned to a Pretoria court room from Robben Island, along with two other Rivonia trialists, some years after sentencing. They were there to give evidence for Pan-Africanist Congress leader Zeph Mothopeng, who was suing the government for torture.

'The press had publicised that the Rivonia people were coming to give evidence. But I remember when I was giving evidence I looked at the gallery, there were just six people present. And those were my family members. Such

was the intimidation and fear. I think this symbolises the position as it existed throughout the country'.

Gradually, though, the pressures outside increased and a sense of this filtered through the prison walls: the Durban strikes; the Soweto uprising; the founding of the United Democratic Front; the resistance of the mid-80s; and the consolidation of the labour movement. The significance of these events could not be barred from prison.

From inside, they watched the planting of seeds for the international campaigns that would contribute to their own release. 'The Release Mandela Campaign, started around Nelson but had a significance which must not be ignored. It was taken up by the ANC and made an international affair.

'Incidentally Kathy really started the campaign, back in the 1950s', commented Sisulu.

Kathrada explained that he was 'closely connected' with Mandela throughout his underground existence, '(I was) part of a committee that was looking after his movements and arrangements. So it was just a natural thing that when he got arrested we formed this release committee.

'In '56 I wasn't arrested with the first lot of treason trialists. And when the first lot were arrested we started a Free Our Leaders campaign. The next week I was inside. Every time we started a release campaign, I joined those inside. (To Sisulu) I hope you aren't planning your next arrest!'

Sisulu responds: 'Once I was arrested with him (Kathrada) and the police said, Sisulu, you are now old. Don't move with this man!'

In the event, they 'moved' together in the close proximity of a shared prison cell for many years. That they became as family to each other shows in every passing remark. 'Have you given up your diet?' - as one or the other takes sugar in his tea. 'Are you managing to exercise?'

Sisulu and Kathrada know each other's aches and pains, quirks and strengths. They have seen each other through the dark years and the recent times of disturbing hope. It is a comradeship born of struggle - and one which has grown far beyond it.



Back with the people: Andrew Mlangeni with local youths at his home in Soweto

Gill de Vlieg, Afrapix

A new dynamic - and some new rules

The government's actions since releasing Walter Sisulu and other African National Congress leaders seems to suggest that while these veterans will be permitted to project ANC ideas and policy, this liberty will not be readily accorded to others.

At the mass welcome rally near Johannesburg, Sisulu and his comrades could address a packed stadium from a platform dominated by a giant ANC emblem and South African Communist Party banner - without drawing government sanction.

Sisulu could safely end his address with the words: 'The stage we have reached in the struggle is irreversible. Hence the need for unity, consolidation and discipline in order to intensify the struggle for liberation.

'Forward to peace and democracy! Long live the ANC! Long live our alliance with the South African Communist Party! Long live the working-class movement!'

But *New Nation*, the newspaper edited by his son, Zwelakhe Sisulu, has been threatened with suspension by the Minister of Home Affairs - mainly because it is judged to have published articles promoting the image of the ANC.

Certain marches have been permitted only on the express condition that no flags be displayed. And at least two people have already been charged for displaying ANC stickers distributed after the welcome rally.

Not only have trials of alleged ANC members continued since release day, 10 October, but new trials are about to begin.

This schizophrenic response to the ANC on the part of the state has fuelled speculation that state president FW de Klerk would like to create a manage-



The 'welcome home' rally near Johannesburg: ANC and SACP flags without government sanction

able, domesticised 'internal' wing of the ANC.

His chief negotiator, constitutional development minister Gerrit Viljoen has contributed to the notion that the government is still unable to contemplate talks with the ANC except on its own terms.

Clinging to the position that the ANC cannot be unbanned while it is committed to violence, Viljoen has hinted that the government might begin 'negotiations' without the ANC.

'We have now given everyone a chance to participate. But it has not been used generally by all, so we have to move on now with those who want to move'.

The released leaders have made it clear that they are not about to jettison their organisation to take part in talks with the government.

'There is only one ANC. Its headquarters are in Lusaka and we have every reason to believe it exists within South Africa', Ahmed Kathrada has stated. 'Our leadership is absolutely united and we owe our allegiance to one ANC'.

A message from Lusaka, welcoming the men back into the 'collective leadership of the ANC', reinforced this position.

While there are clear pitfalls to holding a privileged position in relation to the state, there are also potential gains. And no doubt the former Rivonia trialists will exploit this position - with the backing of the Mass Democratic

Movement.

For the first time since the late 1950s, internal liberation forces have a body of senior leaders who cannot be silenced, jailed and driven into hiding.

The Rivonia men are special. Their immunity is in no small measure due to the fact that their releases were compelled by a complex set of political factors. The pressures which produced this result will also not tolerate their rearrest, detention or restriction. The fact that they have been granted passports despite the openly ANC-tone of the rally testifies to that.

In recent years only top level clerics such as Archbishop Tutu and Dr Allan Boesak have had anything like an immunity from detention, restriction and political prosecution. While they may be popular in their own right, they are rooted in church structures rather than political organisations.

The released ANC leaders, while likely to set up their own office and retain their symbolic importance as a distinct ANC presence, will work very closely with formations in the MDM. Furthermore, they will have ongoing contact with Lusaka and be free, it seems, to act openly as part of the ANC.

Whatever else the state does to comply with international demands for change - and the move on the Separate Amenities Act suggests it will give away nothing more than it has to - already the releases have contributed a vital new element to resistance politics.