

Op-ed by HR Valentin Inzko: Nelson Mandela is a Role Model to Everyday Heroes in BiH

By Valentin Inzko

Nelson Mandela will be buried today amid universal recognition of his profound and enduring contribution to South Africa's transition to multiethnic democracy, and to the struggle for peace and reconciliation throughout the world.

I am convinced that his legacy matters also to Bosnia and Herzegovina, and to all of us.

In 2006, accepting an award from the Mostar Centre for Peace and Multiethnic Cooperation, Mandela expressed pleasure "if I have in any way inspired the people of Bosnia and Herzegovina, who have suffered so much, to continue to work on reconciliation and the establishment of lasting peace." He identified a common goal among citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina and South Africa, since the people of both countries have particular historical reasons to focus on inter-ethnic co-existence.

Nelson Mandela's crucial role was to articulate this common goal in a compelling and courageous way. Because of his noble convictions and goals, he spent almost three decades in prison.

He believed that most South Africans were prepared – indeed willing – to live together in a society based on equality, mutual respect and diversity, and he led this majority view past a determined and well-organised minority view that insisted on separating the country's various communities.

"Can you imagine what would have happened to us had Nelson Mandela emerged from prison in 1990 bristling with resentment?" Archbishop Desmond Tutu, his close associate, asked this week. "Can you imagine where South Africa would be today had he been consumed by a lust for revenge?"

Instead of putting himself at the head of a fearful and intolerant constituency, Mandela showed extraordinary wisdom and magnanimity and led a much larger constituency, of all those prepared to move forward in a spirit of tolerance and optimism. He once irritably confronted ANC activists unhappy about his willingness to compromise. "I was imprisoned for 27 years and I have forgiven those people – why can't you?"

From such moral heights comes authority.

And this authority, on the side of inclusiveness and solidarity that crossed communal divisions, could be communicated through powerful gestures, famously, for example, when he donned the Springbok jersey – long viewed as an emblem of just one, at the time ruling community – and marched onto the pitch to wish the national team good luck at the 1995 rugby world cup final in Johannesburg.

The authorities of Bosnia and Herzegovina today face many problems. These problems can be overcome. No one will dismiss the efforts that many of them have made to address these problems, often with courage and honesty. At the same time, there isn't a political leader that would look at what has been achieved in recent years with any satisfaction.

The politics of grievance and negative emotions has failed.

BiH citizens have repeatedly expressed their desire for a new politics – but they can only do this if their leaders adopt a new strategy and demonstrate more good will and constructive attitudes.

The fact is that in Bosnia and Herzegovina today, as in South Africa in the 1990s, most citizens will respond willingly to a message of hope, not fear, to a programme of reconciliation, not separation, to an agenda for construction of a future, not obstruction.

We can mark the passing of this great global icon simply by making glib pronouncements about the need for peace and reconciliation – or we can use the occasion of Nelson Mandela's funeral to stop for a moment and reflect on the lessons and messages BiH leaders and all of us could learn from the South African experience.

Bosnia and Herzegovina can and must complete its transition from war to peace. It is possible for this country to

succeed by celebrating – not denying – its diversity. It is possible for this society to utilise its innate strengths of forbearance, resilience, creativity and compassion. It is possible for a broad-minded majority of BiH citizens to prevail over a bigoted minority – and bring that minority on board over the long run. It is possible for Bosnia and Herzegovina to become a full-fledged member of the European family as a sovereign and prosperous democracy.

All these things are possible – but the possibility will only become a reality when BiH leaders articulate confidence, courage and magnanimity and abandon the politics of fear and negative messages that have delivered so poor results for so long.

Nelson Mandela is probably the last, or one of the last great heroes of our age. But I believe that Bosnia and Herzegovina has many small heroes, who like Nelson Mandela engage in everyday struggle for a better life, who forgive and with their actions prove that successful coexistence is not only needed, but also possible.

Valentin Inzko is the International Community's High Representative for Bosnia and Herzegovina. He had the opportunity to meet Nelson Mandela in October 2003.