

**Remarks by H. E. Sibongiseni Dlamini-Mntambo at an event hosted by the Bank
of Canada in Ottawa, 1 May 2019**

Special guests,

Ladies and gentlemen,

Good evening, Sanibonani, gooienaand, bonsoir.

Last year on the 10th of December 2018, the world marked 70 years since the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Regrettably this milestone which should be celebrated to mark an end to human rights abuse seems to be mired by challenges illustrating that the struggle to secure human rights is far from over.

I am deeply honoured to have been invited to speak here today along an institution whose mission is to highlight and remind us that we are born equal, we each have rights, individually and with others. Ladies and gentlemen, the Canada Museum of Human Rights is an institution which seeks to affirm the basic human rights and freedoms as indicated in the articles of the declaration that “all human beings are born free and equal, both in dignity and in rights”.

SOUTH AFRICA AND HUMAN RIGHTS

I grew up at a time when the apartheid system in South Africa was still the order of the day. The system had progressively disenfranchised the indigenous black people, stripped them of their dignity, curtailing their rights, their citizenship and they could not vote in their country. Repressive laws classified and forcefully

separated people by race; declared the mixing of races to be “immoral”, denied the majority of the rights to own land, to access decent education. Chief Albert Luthuli the President of the African National Congress from 1952 to 1960 and the first African who in 1960 received the Nobel Peace Prize comment that <I quote>

“The apartheid government took every opportunity to present us in the world as sub-human beings incapable of assimilating civilization, dwarfing our personality and trying to make us believe that we are nobodies” <close quote>

When we (the oppressed) resisted apartheid, with the barrel of a gun, military occupation, violent suppression of protest and threats of imprisonment became the order of the day. Many of our people were exiled, some jailed, murders were committed with impunity, and some of our people even to this day cannot be accounted for.

Ladies and gentlemen, South Africa has immense support and admiration for the work of Canada Museum of Human Rights. It seems to resonate with the stand of the likes of the Right Honourable Diefenbaker *and Mulroney* who raised their voices until the United Nations declared apartheid a crime against humanity.

Ladies and gentlemen, the apartheid government was so successful at limiting our access to international news that I continue to be surprised by stories of how ordinary Canadians also raised their voices against the tyranny of apartheid. It was through my visit to the Human Rights Museum’s that I was amazed on how this institution has intricately managed to tell the story of South Africa to

Canadians. Among the Museum's permanent exhibitions are stories of some of our anti-apartheid giants, whose resilience and ethical leadership brought us our freedom.

I need to especially express our appreciation for the Museum's recent exhibition, Mandela: Struggle for Freedom. For this special exhibition, the Museum partnered with Johannesburg's Apartheid Museum. In doing so, the museum did not merely *tell* our story, but involved South Africa in *how* our story should be told. This commitment to credibility is sincerely appreciated.

The work of the Museum makes it clear to me – and to the thousands of Canadians that visited it - that although we were separated by vast oceans, Canadians did not forget South Africa during our darkest days when we waged a war on a crime against humanity. Without such global solidarity – we would have still been dodging guns and tanks and armies in our streets. And if we did not have organisations like the Canadian Museum for Human Rights reminding us of the horrors of apartheid, and other atrocities in the world we have no doubt that disguised versions of apartheid would keep on resurfacing across the world and they will seem normal.

THE NEED FOR VIGILANCE

Ladies and gentlemen there is a need to be vigilant, to highlight human rights abuse regardless of where they seem to surface. Be it in sport, in the economy, the work place, at home etc. Today South Africa has again been shaken to the core by what seems to be blatant abuse of human's rights. To place this in

context, I need to tell the story of Sara Baartman. Ms Baartman was a Khoisan woman born in South Africa in the 1770s. During her life, her physical appearance was considered so different from traditional European women that she was taken to England, where she was displayed at county fairs, became a subject and an object of study in finding the missing link between man and animals. The French enslaved her and the scientists obsessed on her genitals and following her death, her body parts were extracted, her genitals were placed in jars. And her remains were shown at a museum in France. Eventually, in 2002 - about 230 years after her birth – Ms Baartman’s remains left Europe and were returned to South Africa for a dignified burial.

We may think that the body of a black woman is now safe from such prodding and scrutiny and public humiliation. But this morning I awoke to the news that the Swiss-based Court of Arbitration for Sport has ruled against South African runner, Caster Semenya. The Court’s ruling has found – and here I paraphrase - that Ms Semenya’s naturally high testosterone provide her with an unfair advantage and that for her to be considered a “proper” woman, she would need to take medication to lower her testosterone levels to standards deemed acceptable for a woman. As the South African government, we have always maintained that these regulations trample on the human rights and dignity of Caster Semenya and other women athletes. We have requested the full judgement so that we can study it before responding in detail. But I had to use this opportunity to express our disappointment with this outcome. Women come in different shapes and sizes and races and strengths. We do not need to be squeezed into neat definitions of

womanhood. We do not need to be gawked at in museums or county fairs or Courts of Arbitration.

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development rightly highlights sport's role, singling out "its promotion of tolerance and respect" and contributions "to the empowerment of women and young people, individuals and communities, as well as to health, education and social inclusion".

Today we again look upon Canada to support South Africa as we fight for the dignity of Ms Semenya. We should not wait for 100 years and then speak about how she was abused or try and immortalise her in one form or another. The time is now let us walk the talk.

25 years of Democracy

Ladies and gentlemen, our country turns 25 this year. Generations of black South Africans took to the polls for the first time ever in 1994. We recognise that we continue to face many challenges, but we also want to use our 25th anniversary to reflect on the progress we have made. Now, we can celebrate our renowned bill of rights which states that <I quote> *"The state may not unfairly discriminate directly or indirectly against anyone on one or more grounds, including race, gender, sex, pregnancy, marital status, ethnic or social origin, colour, sexual orientation, age, disability, religion, conscience, belief, culture, language and birth."* <end quote>.

While we can look to our corner at the tip of Africa and celebrate our progress and our commitment to basic human rights, we also look around and cannot help but be concerned at the state of the global geopolitical environment. We see some key global players turning their gaze inward, building barriers so that they can focus on their own domestic agendas. Multilateral collective action to improve the world is being openly undermined. We *cannot* allow ourselves to be lulled into thinking that the global fight for freedom is over. We are happy that Canada shares the same values on human rights as South Africa.

South Africa also celebrates that it is part of a booming Africa. We are a continent of over 1 billion people where the size of our growing middle class seems unstoppable. In Africa, we have a young and energetic population that pulls us “old people” into a digital era.

Ladies and gentlemen, let me conclude by saying that we still have a long way to go. The road will not be easy because it is not at the best interest of everyone to afford all humans their right to dignity. 70 years later we are still grappling with discrimination on for example race, gender, sexual orientation, *ethnicity, religion, disability, etc.*

The fight for the protection and realisation of human rights and fundamental freedoms is far from over. For the sake of our children and a better world let us continue fighting; we will one day win the battle.

I thank you.