Minister Pär Stenbäck, Chairman of UWC Red Cross Nordic Council:

The Legacy of Nelson Mandela

Dear students, teachers and fellow Council Members

Speaking today about Nelson Mandela, it would be easy for me to start and finish by declaring him a hero and a freedom fighter that saved his nation and gave it a new moral backbone after a period of racial oppression. In order to understand the true meaning of his greatness, we need to look at the whole picture of his evolution as human being and a leader of his people.

I had the honor of personally meeting Nelson not long after he was finally released from his long imprisonment. It happened in Johannesburg on the 30th of April 1991 when I was in South Africa as Secretary General of the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies. My mission was to push our SA society towards racial equality among its leadership. Actually, I had already seen Mandela live, at the Independence Celebration of Namibia in Windhoek on March 21, 1990. He was perhaps the most celebrated person there alongside Sam Nujoma, the SWAPO leader and the new President of Namibia.

At that time Mandela found himself in a challenging position: The world opinion saw him already as the real leader of SA, and indeed he was the undisputed chairman of ANC. Also the white government of SA saw him as its main speaking partner on the road to a reformed, democratic country. But no final decisions had been made; Mandela and ANC demanded full and equal participation in government, complete abolition of the apartheid system and free elections. Negotiations were ongoing, strikes and strife between ANC and the Zulu Inkhata party was growing. If these situations were not handled with utmost care, a bloody civil war could follow.

Did we discuss these serious themes when we met that day? You may guess so, but no. Nelson´s major concern was to receive news about those Red Cross delegates whom he had met him during his 27 years in prison! As you may know, even if SA was a strict apartheid state, it adhered to the Geneva conventions and the regulations concerning Red Cross visits to political prisoners. This had not been self-evident and Red Cross access to Robben Island was denied for certain periods. However, between 1967 and 1986 Red Cross delegates visited Mandela, among them my friend Jacques Morrilton whom I cooperated with in Geneva for several years.

(The right to visit political prisoners by Red Cross delegates, inscribed in the international humanitarian rules and regulations, may not look important to external observers, but to the isolated prisoners it is a life-line. This right is granted on the condition that critical observations by the delegates are not published; only brought to the attention of the responsible authorities. Red Cross is sometimes criticized for not “speaking up”, but that would mostly be to the detriment of the prisoners. When a government repeatedly refuses to improve prison conditions, ICRC has gone public, but only in a few cases.)

My meeting with Nelson Mandela became a relaxed chat with a friendly and soft-spoken man who had gone through a life-time ordeal and was now facing another challenge. He recommended patience, forgiveness and reconciliation. His final release had been preceded by an almost complete abolishment of the apartheid system and unbanning of ANC and other parties after F.W. de Klerk had

become president of SA. But the final goal, the introduction of a new constitution with guarantees of equal rights and democratic elections, was not yet achieved. It would take a few more years.

Now let us take a few steps back into the curriculum vitae of Nelson Mandela, in order to understand his transformation from a freedom fighter accepting and performing acts of violence, into a man of reconciliation and denouncement of violence as means to achieve political goals.

It is true that the young Nelson Mandela received military training in the 60´ies. In the book "Conversations with me" from 2010, Mandela describes how he was trained in shooting and handling explosives in Ethiopia in the summer of 1962. Those of you who have seen the recent Mandela film will remember the bombing of different targets by ANC. In plain words used then and today, Mandela had become a terrorist.

When he actively engaged in negotiations from 1985 onwards, the apartheid regime was very much focused on this question: ANC should renounce violence and give up its armed struggle, which had by that time led to many victims on both sides. In his autobiography "Long Walk to Freedom", Nelson states his case in the following way:
"I responded (to this demand) that the state was responsible for the violence and that it is always the oppressor, not the oppressed, who dictates the form of the struggle. If the oppressor uses violence, the oppressed have no alternative but to respond violently. In our case, it was simply a legitimate form of self-defense. I ventured that if the state decided to use peaceful methods, the ANC would also use peaceful means. It is up to you, I said, not us, to renounce violence" (1988).

In the end, the apartheid regime had to listen to him. But he had also to convince the rest of the world that he was not a terrorist forever, that a new SA would not repeat the oppressiveness and domination policy, by discriminating the white population of the country. As ANC had received aid and support from politicians, among them Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan doubted that democracy would rule in a new SA.

Mandela defended the alliances ANC had made in the following way: "*Which man of honor will desert a life-long friend at the insistence of a common opponent and still retain a measure of credibility with his people?"*

The Anti-Apartheid Movement had to grapple with the same accusations. After the Sharpeville massacre, this world-wide movement became stronger by the year. I wrote my first article about apartheid in the SA universities in 1962 and I became secretary of the Finnish Anti-Apartheid Committee in 1965, chaired by a famous trade union leader, the Sea-farers´ Union. During the whole 60´ies, students debated the use of violence in the anti-colonial freedom struggle. In the beginning, some colonial powers used violence to suppress up-risings, like Malaysia, Kenya, Angola, Mozambique, Rhodesia and Algeria, but soon they realized that they were on the wrong side of history.

The use of violence caused a moral dilemma for many liberal and moderate leaning social democrats. What we reacted against was the tendency to create myths of heroism, of violence as a must and an end itself, combined with contempt for peaceful and non-violent methods. I had friends on the far left who volunteered to fight in the African bush; today many are disappointed with the legacy of

that struggle. Freedom fighters monopolized power after victory and military coups became a feature of many African countries.

Today we must realize that this negative legacy and the positive legacy of Nelson Mandela are competing for the SA post-apartheid narrative. Will his dream of a nation with room for all races on equal footing prevail, or will a narrow-minded concept of a one-party system carry the day? Even if the demand for revenge and retribution for past injustices has faded, attacks on the economic cleavages continue. Nelson Mandela saw it coming and warned that driving out the whites would destroy the economy of the country. He referred to the ANC Freedom Charter which states: "SA belongs to all who live in it, black and white."

Let us cherish the memory and the legacy of Nelson Mandela. When the 85 year old Nelson visited the British Red Cross, he said the following:

"*Not only does the Red Cross hold a special place in our collective sense of ourselves as a globally caring community; to me personally, and those who shared the experience of being political prisoners, the Red Cross was a beacon of humanity within the dark inhumane world of political imprisonment."*