



10 April 2013

*Speech Delivered by SACP General Secretary*

## **Cde Blade Nzimande**

*on the 20<sup>TH</sup> Anniversary Commemoration of*

## **Cde Chris Hani's Death**

Twenty years ago, Cde Chris Hani, the serving general secretary of the SACP, was gunned down in the driveway of his East Rand home. Cde Chris had gone out to buy newspapers that morning from a local shop. On his return he spoke to his daughter Nomakhwezi on the intercom in the driveway. There was a white guy who wanted to speak to him, he said. He wouldn't be a moment.

We don't know what Cde Chris was thinking, as he turned to speak with the person approaching him up the driveway. In those years, Cde Chris was frequently stopped in the street by fellow South Africans, black and white. They wanted to engage him – some to express admiration, or to raise a concern, others to argue with him about communism and religion, or the collapse of the Soviet Union. Cde Chris always made time for these impromptu engagements.

It was the Saturday morning of an Easter weekend, April 10, 1993. For three years the multi-party negotiations at the World Trade Centre, not far from Hani's home, had dragged on. By early April 1993 the talks had been stalled once more for months. The De Klerk regime was still not willing to accept the prospect of democratic majority rule under an ANC-dominated government.

Those who assassinated Cde Chris later admitted to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission that they intended to provoke a violent racial backlash. They cynically calculated that they would provoke random killings of whites in retaliation for the assassination of this hugely popular leader, and that these in turn would escalate into a racial civil war. This would put an end to the negotiations process, and therefore to any likelihood of majority rule. Although these cynical calculations were to backfire completely, they were, on the face of it, not so far-fetched.

At least one independent public opinion poll at the time showed that Cde Chris was easily the most popular political figure in SA, after Mandela. At the 1991 ANC Durban National Conference, Cde Chris stepped down from a one-on-one contest with Cde Thabo Mbeki for the deputy presidency of the ANC (in favour of the veteran Cde Walter Sisulu). This was done in the interests of ensuring ANC unity. However, in the elections for additional NEC members he easily polled the highest votes – 94,7% of the total of voting delegates.

Cde Chris was hugely popular. His popularity was not won on the front-pages of the print media. It was not won through cheap populism, or grandstanding. Still less through the arrogant display of wealth and bling. Cde Chris's popularity was won through years of struggle and self-sacrifice.

### **Hero of the Wankie Campaign**

He was a hero of the 1967 Wankie Campaign in which he bravely commanded a joint MK-ZIPRA force in a series of battles over two months and across more than 200kms of rough terrain. Crossing over the Zambezi River from Zambia into northwest Zimbabwe (then Rhodesia), the joint guerrilla force inflicted significant casualties on the Rhodesian and apartheid South African security forces. This was the first sustained combat activity of MK forces, head-to-head with the enemy. After two months and at least two major battles, one lasting 6-days, Cde Chris managed to evade the pursuing forces who had helicopters and fighter-bombers, and escape into Botswana with 7 other comrades.

By all accounts, Cde Chris's conduct throughout the campaign was exemplary. He took on the most dangerous tasks. He shared his scarce rations with those he commanded. Looking back on the campaign in later years, Cde Chris described it as an important turning point for the national liberation movements of SA and Zimbabwe.

*"We were tempered in battle, we were tested under difficult conditions and I think we succeeded....Our moral qualities, our conviction and our toughness were exceptional, and we maintained a discipline and unity which very few armies would have under those circumstances. I mean no regular army would have endured, you know, marching all the way from there without proper logistics."*

Although the campaign did not succeed in its ultimate military objective – namely to open up a route from Zambia into South Africa itself, it had an important political impact. Looking back Cde Chris said:

*"...It was a turning point in terms of the struggle in Zimbabwe. The people of Zimbabwe*

*felt the impact of that. The enemy couldn't suppress information about it. So although we didn't succeed, I think we inspired the population. We also inspired people politically in SA, because the press in SA...now began to say ANC guerrillas are crossing into Zimbabwe, running battles fought around Wankie. So our people got the message that the ANC [which they been told] was kaput when actually it was in there fighting."*

## **The Lusaka Memorandum**

But history doesn't always advance in a straight line. Notwithstanding the important morale-boost that the Wankie campaign gave to the people of SA and Zimbabwe – back in Lusaka where the ANC and MK exile headquarters were then located, Cde Chris experienced huge frustration. After spending long months in detention in Botswana, Cde Chris and seven MK comrades were looking forward to being debriefed on their Wankie campaign experiences. They felt many strategic and tactical lessons had been learnt. But there was to be no welcoming reception for them. There was no formal de-briefing from the MK command structures – although fellow MK rank-and-file comrades were greatly inspired by what they heard from the Wankie combatants.

Among the few older comrades anxious to glean information from the Wankie experience were Cde Joe Slovo, and the veteran Jack Simons. As frustration built up, Cde Chris became convinced that some of the key senior leadership of MK was not focused on the home front. His mounting frustration eventually gave rise to a Memorandum which he and six others compiled. It made serious allegations against some of the MK leadership, and specifically alleging that some were more interested in business projects than fighting. It also spoke out against nepotism, alleging that some individuals with leadership connections were favoured with bursaries and diplomatic postings, while others were doing the actual fighting. The Memorandum circulated widely within MK camps and was tacitly supported by many. The initial reaction of the ANC and MK leadership, however, was defensive, even arrogant. A tribunal was set up and it sentenced the seven who were signatories to death. Fortunately interventions by Mzwayi Piliso, Oliver Tambo, Ray Alexander and Joe Slovo prevented the worst, but Hani's membership of the ANC was temporarily suspended.

However, the Memorandum and the storm that it stirred up soon had a positive impact. It was a key catalyser of the critical 1969 ANC Morogoro Conference at which Cde OR Tambo conceded there were many challenges within the movement. The conference produced the outstanding Morogoro Strategy and Tactics document and a more effective NEC team.

Looking back on these events in the early 1990s, Hani was reluctant to discuss them in any detail. He felt that the Memorandum had perhaps over-stepped the mark with some of its allegations and reckless language, but he certainly never felt that the core concerns were wrong, and he certainly did not reverse his basic judgment in regard to some of the individuals who were named in the Memorandum.

## **Two kinds of heroism**

What is the point of remembering all of this now? It reminds us that there are two kinds of

courage – and Cde Chris had them both in abundance. There is courage under enemy fire, face to face with hostile forces. And then there is the other kind of courage – having the courage to face up squarely and honestly to deviations within one’s own ranks. Tackling bureaucratism, factionalism, favouritism, the loss of morale and moral direction, the problems of corruption – and, above all, to do all of this NOT in order to advance your own personal or factional interests, but out of a sense of responsibility to one’s organisations, to the struggle, to the people.

Perhaps more than ever, it is these qualities that are required of us in our present reality.

### **To move amongst the people like a fish swimming in the sea**

However, the grass-roots popularity of Cde Chris in the early 1990s did not rest only or even primarily on his role in the Wankie Campaign, or the lesser known episode of the Lusaka Memorandum.

In 1974 Cde Chris walked for two days using a compass and the stars as a guide to take him over the Botswana border and to Zeerust, some 55 kilometres inside SA. From there he took a bus to Mafeking and a train to Johannesburg. And, after a brief and dangerous stay in the city, he proceeded on to Lesotho.

The two most important lessons of the Wankie Campaign were:

1. That it was critical to have an accessible rear base, from which supplies and recruits could be received, in which training could be conducted, and to which the sick and wounded could retreat and recover; and
2. That the best cover for guerrilla operations was not a remote, unpopulated game reserve (which is what Wankie was) but rather the hamlets, villages, settlements and townships of the rural and urban working class and poor. “The guerrilla”, as Mao famously put it, “must move amongst the people like a fish swimming in the sea.”

These were the two guiding principles that Cde Chris set about putting into practice. With his arrival in Lesotho (or “The Island” as it was then known in ANC and MK circles), Cde Chris soon established it as a dynamic hub for MK, ANC and SACP work inside of SA. Literally thousands of South African refugees, and volunteers passed through Hani’s Lesotho operational machinery. Comrades were housed and cared for, they were engaged in political discussion, and many former BC adherents joined the ANC and SACP as a consequence. But, above all, the focus was on re-building underground ANC, SACP and MK structures within SA, and of connecting up with the re-emerging trade union, social and political movements. Cde Hani personally opened up remote routes from Lesotho into SA. The Lesotho machinery was in dynamic contact with structures in the Western Cape, Eastern Cape, Free State and Gauteng.

Unlike his own earlier post-Wankie Lusaka experience, Cde Chris paid a great deal of attention to personally de-briefing new exiles as well as tested operatives coming in from the field. Every detail was important to him – what were the conditions facing people in

this or that village, or township? He was also genuinely interested in the individuals he was talking to, their personal hopes and aspirations, their fears, the situation of their families back home. During his Lesotho period, Cde Chris also slipped back into SA on many occasions.

Many years later, in December 1991, at the SACP's first legal congress back home, the hundreds of delegates present were surprised to find that Cde Chris, chairing the plenary sessions, remembered the majority of them by name. He also often remembered their home villages and townships and even the names of relatives.

In the very last years of his life, Cde Chris continued to move among the people like a fish swimming in the sea. He was now the general secretary of the SACP with an office in the NUM headquarters then in Rissik Street, downtown Johannesburg. But he was hardly ever in the office. He was forever visiting remote rural villages in the far North one week, in the Northern Cape, or Mpumalanga the next. He was not afraid of going into violence-torn hot spots like Boipatong and the hostels of the East Rand, and he was central to the setting up of Self Defence Units in response to the regime's brutal low intensity conflict negotiating strategy.

We are now living in a somewhat different reality – but the lessons of Cde Chris's life are as relevant as ever.

We need to ask ourselves – are we and our structures moving amongst the people like fish swimming in the sea? Or are we more like stranded fish, fish out of water, pre-occupied with our own internal battles and factional squabbles?

Are our branches and districts in dynamic contact with the daily realities of our villages and townships? What has happened to COSATU locals? Hardly a week passes without one or another so-called "township service delivery protest". Are our SACP voting district branches providing revolutionary leadership to these events? Or are we either absent, or passive observers, or part of one or another problematic faction? Where were the ANC and SANCO branches in Marikana to take up the issues of appalling housing and social conditions, or community safety in the face of vigilante forces? Apart from successful election campaigns and centenary celebrations, can we think of a single ANC campaigning pamphlet or poster taking up the issues that confront our communities in the last decade?

**Let us not try to deploy the dead and departed, nor to wipe out the history of apartheid**

As we remember and celebrate the life of Cde Chris, it is also important that we are not selective or try to vulgarise his life and some of the things he said. Some in our ranks try to use the statement by Cde Chris that he was not interested in joining government to try and rubbish SACP decisions about participating in our own government. They say what Chris said should have led the SACP not to participate in government, including its most senior leadership. Where would Chris have been if he had lived into the post 1994 era? Frankly we do not know, except that he would have gone to where the ANC and SACP would have deployed him. Because Cde Chris was disciplined he would have set aside his own personal preferences and accept organisational deployment, including going into government if it

was so decided. This is precisely what he did with the suspension of the armed struggle!

We must persuade some of our comrades not to try and do the impossible, ***the dead and the departed cannot be deployed. Let us not try and deploy Cde Chris in 2013 when he passed away in 1993.*** Rather let us treasure the memory of Cde Chris, and that memory must not be used opportunistically.

In addition, some in the media, and a few in our ranks, are playing an old reactionary, and often anti-communist, card of 'praising' the dead in order to condemn the living. For instance some of the media that is praising Cde Chris today had condemned him as a very dangerous 'hawk' whilst he was alive, and being accused of secretly training some imaginary army in Zimbabwe. Now that he is no more, he is being 'praised' by the same media, dishonestly of course, in order to attack the current leadership of our movement. We must expose this hypocrisy.

We must also use occasions like these to always tell the story of apartheid and its crimes, so that even future generations who would not have lived the horrors (or privileges) of apartheid **MUST KNOW** what happened; so that we must never go back there. Like the holocaust, we must teach the history of apartheid in our schools, colleges and universities, including the heroic struggles of our people against this evil system, including the role of leaders like Cde Chris!

We must resist attempts by liberals and organisations like the DA who are trying very hard to erase the history of apartheid and only tell us to look into the future. We cannot look into the future if we forget our past. We must resist this ideological blackmail by liberals and other reactionaries, and let future generations always know about our history. For that matter, the legacy of apartheid is still very much alive today, and its racial, class and patriarchal forms are still being daily reproduced.

As we commemorate this 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of our fallen hero, it is important that we ask ourselves these hard but honest questions – as he would have done. It is not a matter of lamenting or complaining – our job as communists is to put right what must be corrected.

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**LET US HONOUR THE MEMORY OF OUR HERO, CDE CHRIS THEMBISILE HANI, IN THIS 20<sup>TH</sup> YEAR SINCE HIS ASSASSINATION – BY BUILDING FIGHTING ORGANISATIONS OF THE WORKING CLASS AND POOR!**

**SOCIALISM IS THE FUTURE – BUILD IT NOW!**