STATEMENT OF DEPUTY PRESIDENT THABO MBeki AT THE NATIONAL ANTI-CORRUPTION SUMMIT, Cape Town, 14 April 1999

Chairperson, Distinguished delegates:

Sometime during the 1960's, an English judge sat in his court to decide the complex question whether it was possible to corrupt a corrupt person.

The hearing was occasioned by the fact, uncontested in the case, that a vendor of pornographic material had sold such literature to a young man who had not yet reached the legally defined age of maturity.

The law having defined pornographic material as corrupt, it further prescribed that it was illegal to sell this material to minors because this would result in corrupting the young.

The shop-keeper argued that it was clear to him that by the time the young man visited his shop, he was already familiar with pornography and was therefore, and in the meaning of the law, already corrupt.

Hence the question - can you corrupt a corrupt person!

The judge found the vendor guilty. Nevertheless because of the complexity of the question, he ruled that his own finding should be reviewed by a superior court.

He had found that the law had been broken, but was uncertain as to whether the social morality of the English generations of the 1960's had been violated.

If we follow the English judge, as I believe we should, we too should make the determination that the issue of corruption about which we have convened, is about two distinct matters, one being the matter of the law and the other being a matter of social morality.

Between these two, clearly what must come first is the matter of social morality.

This would suggest that we who are gathered here are faced with the challenge to draw up a moral schedule of rights and wrongs.

This done, we could then proceed to agree on what we need to do to prevent and punish what is morally wrong and to encourage and reward all that is morally right.

Obviously none of us would agree to proceed in this manner as though we were a judicial court of ethics.

Nevertheless we are still called upon to make a judgement about what is right and wrong about our behaviour as a society.

We will still need to make an attempt to understand what it is that happened during the course of the evolution of our society which created the conditions for such behaviour as we might consider morally unacceptable.

Having taken these two steps, clearly, we will have to make an attempt to answer the question -- what is to be done!

If the religious leaders present among us will pardon me, I would like to cite a number of verses from the King James Version of the Biblical Book of Ecclesiastes in the effort to answer the question -- what went wrong?

"I sought in mine heart to give myself unto wine, yet acquainted mine heart with wisdom;

"I made me great works; I buildeed me houses; I planted me vineyards;

"I made me gardens and orchards, and I planted trees in them of all kind of fruits;
"I got me servants and maidens, and had servants born in my house; also I had great possessions of great and small cattle above all that were in Jerusalem before me:

"I gathered me also silver and gold, and the peculiar treasure of kings and of the provinces: I got me men singers and women singes, and the delights of the sons of men, as musical instruments, and that of all sorts.

"So I was great, and increased more than all that were before me in Jerusalem: also my wisdom remained with me.

"And whatsoever mine eyes desired I kept not from them, I withheld not my heart from any joy; for my heart rejoice in all my labour:"

Obviously, this text gives a vivid description of a very successful resident of Jerusalem who, through his labour, has all the material things that anyone of us would like to have - from wine to silver and gold, from an army of servants to in-house musicians, from an abundance of food to what is described as "the delights of the sons of men".

And yet the text goes on:

"Then I looked on all the works that my hands had wrought, and on the labour that I had laboured to do" and, behold, all was vanity and vexation of spirit, and there was no profit under the sun."

It seems to me that this text correctly raises what is perhaps at the heart of the problem of corruption which we have to confront, the relationship within each human being and each society between the material and the spiritual.

All philosophy recognises the fact that what distinguishes us, human beings, from other forms of animal existence is that we have both material and spiritual needs.

Thus the normal human beings we would like to see and to be are people who succeed to maintain the necessary balance between these needs, between what is materially necessary and what is morally good.

This is to say that the exclusive pursuit of one of these, ignoring the other, is to invite disaster.

And yet it would seem to me that many in our society are inspired by a system of values which begins and ends with the pursuits of what is materially beneficial to themselves, with no sense of what is morally correct.

In many instances, our society itself describes as successful and people to be emulated those who are like the resident of Jerusalem described in Ecclesiastes, who have accumulated more wealth than any other who ever lived in that city.

No questions are asked about the ethical behaviour of any of us, as part of determining whether we should indeed be emulated or not. Success is defined as success in having addressed effectively the material needs of the human being.

And so our youth grow up knowing that to be deemed a success in our society, one must possess the luxury cars whose brand names are familiar to all of us. One must have a big and expensive house and dress in the finest garments available in the market.

The issue of how these worldly goods are acquired is immaterial. Indeed, to have acquired them without having worked for them is itself applauded as demonstrating ingenuity and a fleetness of foot and mind.

In such a situation, to commit murder to advance my goal of accumulating wealth becomes permissible. To rob an old age pensioner of his or her pension becomes but a mere means of reaching the goal of self-enrichment by the shortest route possible.

To steal public resources is merely to do the done thing by taking advantage of the position you find yourself in, of access to these resources by virtue of the fact that you happen to be employed in the public service.

To rape women and children is also to take advantage of opportunity to gratify what is described in Ecclesiastes as "the delights of the sons of men".
What I am trying to suggest is that our society evolved in a manner which gave birth to a situation in which a disastrous collapse of social values occurred, to be replaced by the notion that what is good is what serves my individual material interests and pleasures.

Others wiser than I am will undoubtedly provide us with the reasons as to why this happened. But that it happened I am not in any doubt.

Only the mentally blind would fail to see that the things that happen in our country everyday point precisely to this that among many of our fellow citizens there is no ethical barrier which blocks them from actions that are wrong.

The laws that define that such actions are wrong and are therefore punishable by law may very well be there.

Nevertheless, in the absence of the acceptance that beyond the law, there is what is morally right and morally wrong, the law becomes a mere irritant whose provisions I must strive to subvert.

If I am correct in what I have said, then we must strive to find the answer to the question -- what must we all do to rebuild a system of morality in our country, a generally accepted value system that is inimical to actions that are ethically wrong!

It was for this reason that earlier this year, President Nelson Mandela called for "an RDP of the soul."

Fundamentally to create a climate in our country hostile to crime, including crimes of corrupt practice within both the public and private sectors, we surely must do whatever is necessary to effect that RDP of the soul.

In this context, we must all salute the initiative already taken by our religious leaders when they convened the Morals Summit last year. It would seem necessary that we should also consider encouraging all other sectors of our society to follow this example so that we develop a truly national and sustained offensive to rebuild our country's value system.

The representatives of our Government present here will undoubtedly give a report of the Anti-Corruption Conference we held last year to deal with this problem within the public sector. That report will have to include the measures that the Government has taken to put in place the laws, regulations, procedures and institutions to fight the scourge of corruption.

We must also subject these to critical review to assess whether they are effective and adequate for our purposes so that the Government can introduce such changes as may be considered correct and necessary. Clearly, whatever it is that we have to do to address the issue of the RDP of the soul, we must, at the same time, ensure that we have a law enforcement system which gives no quarter to corrupt practice, whoever might be involved in such practice.

On behalf of the Government, I would like to thank all of you, leaders of our people, whatever the sector from which you come, for making time available so that you could participate in this critically important Conference.

I believe that if we are able correctly to answer the question - what went wrong -- we will be halfway to finding the solutions which will make it possible for all of us to realise the common dream of creating a decent, humane and caring society of which all our people would be proud.

We wish the Conference success, confident that it will not disappoint the expectations of our people whose spirit is vexed because they are the daily victims of the scourge of corruption which is a blight on our society.

Thank you for your attention.

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