Statement by His Excellency, Ambassador Kingsley Mamabolo, at a special meeting of the General Assembly dedicated to the life and memory of His Excellency, Dr Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela, held on 19 December 2013 at 10:00 in the Trusteeship Council Chamber

Mr President

On behalf of President Jacob Gedleyihleka Zuma of the Republic of South Africa, the Government and the people of South Africa, I would like to thank you for convening this special meeting of the General Assembly dedicated to the life and memory of the late Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela. I would also like to thank the Secretary General, the distinguished guests of honour seating at the podium and elsewhere in the room, and the distinguished delegates for gracing this occasion. We thank Africa and the world for their solidarity and support since Madiba’s passing and all those who managed to travel all the way to South Africa to mourn our loss. During this period, it became loud and clear to us that Madiba’s passing is a loss to all of us throughout the world. We have been comforted by your calls and messages of condolences. We were also touched by many of you who came to sign the book of condolences at the South African Mission and here at the United Nations.

Mr President

Leaders are not just born to the role. They are born, then made — and sometimes unmade — by their own actions. A leader who is not in tune with the followership soon becomes a leader in limbo and, sooner rather than later, withers. Nelson Mandela never fell into limbo as a leader. At least South Africans could draw comfort from the way Mandela’s death brought them together. It is another of his legacies that, for the first time in their history, people from all races, faiths, ages and income brackets have grieved as one in South Africa. Writing a preface to Shakespeare’s Macbeth, one scholar said: “Every now and again in the history of the world, a man is born – a philosopher, scientist, a poet, a ruler – it does not matter where he is born and lives, he belongs to all of us. It does not matter when he is born, he belongs to all time.” Such a man was Mandela.
Mr President

Ours began largely as a romantic kind of public mourning. This kind of mourning simply eulogises the dead and extols their greatness. The orator never critiques how the dead lived or how they even died. The eulogy, in other words, does not pose questions, but simply restates the simple facts of how the dead lived and died. Former president Thabo Mbeki proved to be the exception. Speaking at the Oxford Synagogue in Killarney, Johannesburg, Mbeki adopted the twin Greek conventions of epainesis and parainesis: “Praise for the fallen and advice for the living”. Mbeki agreed that we should indeed celebrate Mandela’s life, but “we should not end there, we must also ask ourselves a question: What about the future?” In raising questions, Mbeki engaged in what is called tragic public mourning. The orator in this kind of mourning not only praises, but also questions. It doesn’t seek to strike consensus nor maintain the status quo. Rather, a tragic public mourning invites mourners into self-introspection, to probe what brought the calamity or how to take the lessons from the dead to avoid making similar choices in future and take society forward.

Mr President

It was also our renowned international guest, US President Barack Obama, who challenged romantic mourning that eulogises without any introspection or self-criticism. He said: “For the people of South Africa, for those he inspired around the globe - Madiba’s passing is rightly a time of mourning, and a time to celebrate his heroic life. But I believe it should also prompt in each of us a time for self-reflection. With honesty, regardless of our station or circumstance, we must ask: how well have I applied his lessons in my own life? There are too many of us who happily embrace Madiba’s legacy of racial reconciliation, but passionately resist even modest reforms that would challenge chronic poverty and growing inequality. There are too many leaders who claim solidarity with Madiba’s struggle for freedom, but do not tolerate dissent from their own people. And there are too many of us who stand on the sidelines, comfortable in complacency or cynicism when our voices must be heard.” Obama’s speech and Mbeki’s at the synagogue both call for interpretive, critical mourning, instead of offering eulogies that absolve us of responsibility and self-questioning. They demanded that we ask ourselves whether we are worthy heirs to Mandela’s inheritance.

In conclusion Mr President
Speaking at Sunday’s state funeral for Mandela at his ancestral home of Qunu, Eastern Cape, President Zuma said “We cherish the lessons you (Mandela) taught us, of the importance of reconciliation, forgiveness, tolerance and compassion. We have to continue building the type of society you worked tirelessly to construct. We have to take your legacy forward. As your journey ends today, ours must continue in earnest. One thing we can assure you of today, Tata, as you take your final steps, is that South Africa will continue to rise. We pledge to take your vision forward.”

I thank you for your attention.