HUMAN RIGHTS DAY: REMEMBERING ROBERT SOBUKWE’S ROLE IN THE FIGHT FOR FREEDOM AND EQUALITY – IZWELETHU

Robert Sobukwe and Pan Africanist Congress (PAC) supporters march to Orlando police station in the Anti-pass protest. Photo courtesy of UWC-RIM-Mayibuye Archives Collection.

On 21 March 1960, the founding member of the Pan Africanist Congress, Robert Managaliso Sobukwe, together with the community of Sharpeville township orchestrated a peaceful protest against the Pass laws instituted by the ruling Nationalist Party at the time. In what would become known as the Sharpeville Massacre, the police opened fire at the crowd killing 69 people and wounding 180.¹ This day is now known as Human Rights Day where all South Africans pay tribute to our heroic struggle icons on 21 March each year.

Human Rights Day was declared an official public holiday in 1994 and is commemorated annually to reinforce the Bill of Rights included in the South African Constitution, these rights include: equality, human dignity, freedom of movement and
residence, language and culture, and life. This day will forever signify the fight for freedom and equality by those who were bold enough to rise against a broken and inhumane government regime.

“Robben Island is a symbol of triumph of the human spirit over adversity, and one individual who had to overcome such adversity is Sobukwe,” says Morongoa Ramaboa, Robben Island Museum’s Spokesperson. Born 05 December 1924, Sobukwe was a leader, a father, a teacher and a hero to many. As we pay tribute on Human Rights Day it is important to reflect on the pivotal role that Sobukwe, amongst others, played in the events that took place in Sharpeville almost six decades ago,” adds Ramaboa.

Robert Sobukwe’s house is an important inclusion of the Robben Island tour. The story behind Sobukwe and his house on the Island is narrated by tour guides as they take visitors through significant points of interest such as the leper grave, the village and the churches on the Island.

Under the leadership of Sobukwe, the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC) organised a five-day peaceful protest against the pass laws which was set to start on 21 March 1960. This protest signified the PAC’s plan to liberate South Africa by 1963. On the day of the Sharpeville Massacre, Sobukwe left his pass at home and intended to hand himself over at the Orlando Police Station. Walking to the police station he was joined by a group of protesters and, along with most of them, he was arrested and charged with sedition as he arrived at the station. Sobukwe served three times his initial sentence of three years due to Parliament enacting an amendment law by which the Minister of Justice could prolong his sentence indefinitely. He became the only prisoner in history to be detained under the law that became known as “The Sobukwe Clause”. This clause allowed for his sentence to be reviewed on an annual basis at the discretion of the Minister of Justice. It was renewed every year until he left the Island in 1969. Upon his release he moved to Kimberley, where he could live and work, while he remained under a banning order which prevented him from participating in any political activities.

“Banished to Robben Island, where he stayed under 24-hour guard in solitary confinement away from other prisoners for six years, Sobukwe continued to give hope to the hopeless to continue the good fight for freedom. This Human Rights Day may we remember Sobukwe and the countless other freedom fighters who fought bravely for us to enjoy the right to life, equality and human dignity. What is more, may we carry forward their efforts toward a peaceful and prosperous South Africa for ourselves and future generations.” concludes Ramaboa.

More about the Sobukwe Complex:

The Sobukwe complex is located on the east side of the Island and consists of four buildings that were erected during WW II for various purposes including barracks, mess facilities and a hygiene office that became the house in which Robert Sobukwe, one of the founding members of Pan African Congress (PAC) was accommodated.

Robert Sobukwe, the charismatic leader of the PAC was held in solitary confinement in a house some distance away from the Maximum Security Prison from 1963 to 1969. He
was not allowed to communicate with anyone including his warders. Later after Sobukwe left the Island, two dog kennel blocks, an ablution block as well as an open bath for the dipping of dogs were erected. A well that captured rainwater which was used to water the grass in the area was also erected.

Visit Robben Island Museum to take a tour of Sobukwe’s house and other parts of the maximum security prison where many struggle heroes were detained.

To continue Human Rights month as a whole, Robben Island Museum in partnership with the Argentinian museum ESMA will host an exhibition on Thursday, 28 March 2019 at the Nelson Mandela Gateway which will further depict how human rights were violated. For more information on Robben Island Museum, please visit their website http://www.robben-island.org.za/ and for regular update, visit their social media pages:

- **Facebook**: https://www.facebook.com/robbenislandDAC/
- **Twitter**: https://twitter.com/robben_island
- **Instagram**: https://www.instagram.com/robben_island/

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List of references