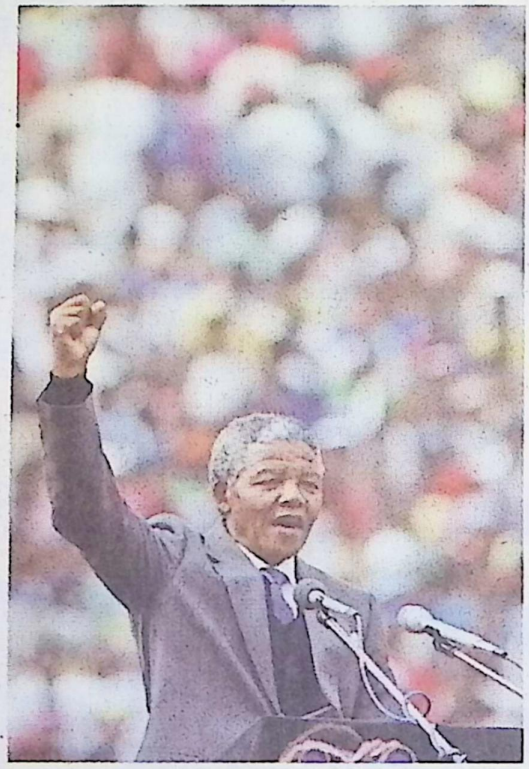
Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela

NADIA KABIR BARB

The television was on and I sat watching, mesmerised by the vast numbers of people filling the screen. To the uninformed observer, it might have looked a bit like a street party. There were men, women, children and people of all races gathering by the hundreds singing, dancing, clapping and chanting. It was in fact live television coverage from outside Nelson Mandela's home in Johannesburg, the morning after he had been pronounced dead. When interviewed, the people on the streets said they were not just mourning his death but also celebrating Mandela's amazing life and achievements.

In an address to the nation on Thursday evening, South African President Jacob Zuma stated simply, "He is now resting, he is now at peace." He continued by saying that, "Our nation has lost its greatest son...our people have lost a father." Undoubtedly most South Africans would agree. Nelson Mandela was not just a visionary, world leader and icon, he also taught the world about forgiveness and was, to quote the Prince of Wales, "the embodiment of courage and reconciliation".



Mandela adressing on February 13, 1990. PHOTO: AFP

My first encounter with political activism was in my first year of university. Nelson Mandela had already been in prison for almost a quarter of a century and although I was aware of, and against apartheid, I had never actively done anything about it. One of my friends, however, was a staunch Mandela supporter and joined the African National Congress (ANC) that year. Although many opposed the view, at the time it was considered a terrorist group. Subsequently this label was removed.

Students were constantly talking about the anti-apartheid movement, Mandela, and the dire situation in South Africa. It made me read up about what was going on and I found myself being disgusted by the human and civil rights violations being perpetrated on a daily basis. Thinking back now, it beggars belief to think that this kind of racial segregation was actually institutionalised in South Africa and lasted for almost fifty years.

Although it was still highly controversial (some claimed that boycotts and sanctions would negatively impact the general population), I recall people boycotting Shell petrol stations, Barclays Bank, not buying produce from South Africa to try and put economic pressure on the then government to abolish apartheid. As I didn't drive a car or Bank with Barclays, I did try to avoid produce from South Africa that was sold in the local supermarkets.

The following year in 1988, 72,000 people gathered at Wembley stadium in London and eighty three of the world's most famous stars performed in a 70th birthday tribute to Mandela. I remember being utterly disappointed at not having been able to attend the concert but like 600 million other people around the world, I watched it on television. Despite it being a concert for Mandela's birthday, it was also seen as a platform for raising worldwide awareness of the imprisonment of Nelson Mandela and saying 'no' to apartheid. It was also referred to as the 'Free Mandela' concert. In the Student Union Shop at my University, there were even 'Free Mandela' t-shirts available.

Finally after years of campaigning, on the 11th of February 1990 Nelson Mandela was released. By this stage he had spent twenty seven years on Robben Island, near Cape Town as a political prisoner. There was a sense of jubilation and people celebrated across the globe. The atmosphere in my university cafeteria, in the lecture theatres and classrooms was electric. Somehow it felt like justice had finally been served and maybe somewhere rightly or wrongly we all felt we had a minute part to play in the grander scheme of things.