

Mewa Ramgobin interviewed by Iain Edwards, Ramgobin's Parliamentary Office, Old Assembly Building, South African Parliament, Cape Town, 29th January, 2003

TAPE 1, SIDE 1

IAIN: We were talking about experiences in jail in the mid to late 80's

MEWA: In 1984 when we were detained under Section 28, the six of us were again in jail. It was the morning when Le Grange alleged that we were revolutionaries and creating a revolutionary situation in South Africa. I was the Public Relations and Press Officer of the two congresses: the Natal Indian Congress and the UDF as such. This allegation was made by Le Grange. I believe he was in Parliament when he made this statement or was the Speaker or something at that stage. I had to respond to this and we got our people together and I said to them this is the shadow of oncoming events. I had telephonic press conference with all the media and we had what was then called Capital Radio which was very popular at that stage. They played my response rather glaringly and decidedly. To the best of my recollection I said to Mr Le Grange publicly 'If you have any such evidence I wonder why you are not acting to protect what you call the security of the state?' This was at about 9/10 o'clock at night. I went to another meeting with Paul David and other colleagues - comrades - but I think we were all tired and for some reason or the other we didn't proceed as we normally did and we drove off. But by then it was past midnight. I drove up home, went up to sleep and within hours the usual knock of the security police. A fellow called Benjamin and others, by the way Benjamin became a member of the ANC after the ANC was unbanned, came there with a warrant to arrest me, which he did. This is one time when you are going away for a long, long time and you need to say goodbyes for a long, long time and I think I had some kind of a dry quote at that stage because you are being arrested, you are going to jail and I said to him 'You have got to do your worst in terms of your authority and in response I will have to do my best.' The blighter realized that he couldn't get around me and he took me up, I don't know, to the 10th, 11th, 12th, 13th Floor, one of those floors, took my details, finger printed me and all that stuff and he was taking me to my cell. They couldn't find a cell to put me in - one to a cell, but never two to a cell - you can put three or more into a cell but not two to a cell and he couldn't find one such cell. And I didn't know who was arrested at that time, but the moment I realized that he couldn't find a cell whilst walking the corridors I asked who else is here and then I heard some voices from the other side and I heard a shout calling out my name. I didn't think he knew that I was there. But then I discovered that Billy was there: Billy, George and MJ were in one cell. They took me to another cell and they just opened the door and shut me in and this guy said 'By the way, do you have any cigarettes for yourself?' And I said to myself this is the first initiative of theirs to make me dependent on them. While still talking to him, he was about to slam the door behind me. I saw this figure from the street lights coming into the cell. And the funny part was this 'It's nice seeing you here!' And I thought it was a funny thing to say in jail. It was Paul David. And then Archie who says 'Hey Mewa it is nice seeing you

here, at least I have company now, but have you eaten?' This was at four o'clock in the morning or so. And rather ironically they serve breakfast about 5 or 6 o'clock and they brought in a hard fried egg and a slice of brown bread and shoved it under the door. 'Ramgobin this is yours'. The following morning, the following day we get transferred to Pietermaritzburg- the six of us - and there we were imprisoned in the new, the Pietermaritzburg New Prison. But they took us to the old prison first which is somewhere in Longmarket or Loop Street in the middle of town and by god when we got off there and I said to myself, 'Not here'. Because you know you can subject yourself to prison conditions but there are some times when you want to know, what are the conditions in that prison. And I had heard so much about the one in Pietermaritzburg. God knows what gave, but then they took us to the new prison. In comparison to the Pietermaritzburg central one the new prison was really comfortable, so to speak in physical ways. Where you had room to yourself, a bed, fresh linen and stuff like that. But prison is prison. No matter how beautiful the surroundings, they imprison you and you prison your mind. Immediately on the following day we slept for a while in the afternoon and I was tired of traveling from Durban in the police van. You know you get battered around, banged around. We woke up to have breakfast – rooibos tea and mealie meal porridge – nice, it was nice, powdered milk made into liquid form. And we did a rethink. This is indefinite detention. No reasons that were given. Because we were given the status of awaiting trial prisoners, immeasurable of privileges were allowed to us.

[Telephone rings and Mewa has telephone discussion]

To go back a while, I had to raise funds for the UDF. I made an appointment with Archie himself and I said to him that I need to meet with you to discuss the future of our country and the role of the church.

IAIN: And you had just been appointed?

MEWA: I was at that stage just appointed as the National Co-Treasurer of the UDF. We had established structures, interim structures, throughout the country and we were not launched officially at that stage but I was already working as the person who was linking up the different sectors in the community nationally from the churches to the – all the various sections of society - was my responsibility.

IAIN: And it was very scattered then?

MEWA: So scattered that you didn't have any real examples of co-ordinated activities. In the meantime we had had interim structures, provincially, and in that provincial structure there were lots of people. People like Terror Lekota, Victoria Mxenge, Virgil Bonhomme, Yunus Mohammed, myself, and a whole range of people. I made an arrangement to meet Archbishop Dennis Hurley to raise funds. He gave me the appointment, we met at his residence on the Berea. He was still head of the Catholic Church in Durban, as Archbishop. I had known him for a number of years and by then I had gotten to call him, not by the name Your Grace, but Father. There was a tremendous amount of love between the two of us to such an extent

that when I was fasting for fourteen days in 1971 he was the person who gave me the first glass of orange juice to drink to break my fast. But we will get to that at another stage. I introduced each one of them, from Terror Lekota and the others to His Grace. I gave him the motivation of our meeting and I said to His Grace `I will now ask each one of them to say whatever they want to say.`

IAIN: OK so it wasn't a one-on-one meeting.

MEWA: No, no, it was a group meeting with him because I believed that you have got to empower people, that you have got introduce people into stages of responsibility and categories of responsibility and accountability. This was the motivation that we build an organization like that and you do not depend on any one individual so that if I am not there at least there are six or seven other people who can continue with the kind of relationships that we had to build among ourselves for the rest of the community. And I said to His Grace, Father this is the motivation of this meeting. We have come here to fundraise for the launch of the United Democratic Front, which was planned to take place in Mitchells Plain in August of that year, I think it was the 20th. In my motivation there was that in view of the fact that the churches had begun to play a significant role in the politics of liberation and to fight oppression. Especially the Catholic Church. At the Catholic Bishops Conference with their own investigations and their expositions on the problems in the country. He listened to us and I said `Before you respond, Father ...`

IAIN: And he was there by himself?

MEWA: By himself. `Before you respond to this Father, I want each one of these comrades of mine to say something to you.` Which I did. I cannot recall exactly what each one of them said from Victoria downwards to whoever they were. I summarized all what they had said to Father, to His Grace again, and His Grace turned around and said `Look I am the head of the Catholic Church here. I get many requests of this nature. It is quite possible that the Black Consciousness people themselves can come one day ...`. And they had already a national profile and he would be placed in a very invidious position to be supportive of one group and not the other. In as much as he understood the concepts of our non-racialism, the concept of our unity and the concept of co-existence that we had presented to him, he conceded that the aspirations of the United Democratic Front were uniting people regardless of race, colour or creed against apartheid was indeed a very formidable and necessary one. It was not based on race, it was not based on hate, it was based on the principles of peace and justice. He conceded all that but he found it very difficult to be associated in direct ways with any one grouping, which I understood. As the head of the church in his congregation he would have the supporters to the IFP, the supporters of the National Party, the Progressives at that stage, whoever they were and there would be Catholics in church but opponents outside of church politically and which is quite understandable. But the kind of work he was doing in the name of the Church was again an eye-opener to me. Actually some of the organizations – society groups which were to become a part of the UDF – were actually been funded by the Catholic Bishops Conference. I told him of that. And he said yes I understand what you are saying. He was no doubt in a bit of a difficult position and he

said he will think about it and come back to us. All of us went back to our two or three cars that we had and as we approached the car, he was on his stoop and he said `Mewa can I see you for a minute before you leave.` So he called me back to his house and he says `You know only an insane man, and an insensitive man can disagree with you. The way you have presented these people, the way you have presented the cause of what you want to do is in keeping with all that I believe in. I am constrained by the Church but I will tell you what I will do. I will make a cheque out in your name and I will give you the cheque and you can have a cheque of R40,000 now. That is what you wanted.` I asked to two minutes to consult because I will not take a decision unilaterally like that. I do not want to create a precedent like that. In an organization like that, it is wrong for me to do so. I went back to my colleagues, my comrades, and I said look this is the position, the old man is prepared to give the money now provided that cheque is made out in my name and not in the name of any one organization of the UDF or any other person. My own political responsibilities told me that I should not do that but I placed myself at their feet. There was a unanimous decision that the cheque be made out in my name and I brought the cheque and I handed it to Yunus Mohammed so that it could be deposited in the account of the UDF. There was a controversy thereafter about the deposit because the person who got elected to the Natal position as the Treasurer to the Natal Executive later on said he didn't know a thing about it and I was placed in a pickle. Because you see when we went to Conference I was elected the National Co-Treasurer

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