

# Albuquerque lawyer takes a new journey to a new South Africa

**Editor's note:** *Two years ago, Eric Sirotkin observed South Africa's first multicultural election. This month, the Albuquerque lawyer and past recipient of the city's Human Rights Award returns to monitor hearings on apartheid crimes. His dispatches will appear in The Tribune throughout his visit.*

CAPE TOWN, South Africa — Two years have passed, but I remember it as if it were yesterday. The election lines, the joy of liberation, the old man who voted for the first time and cried out, "Yes, yes, I'm free!"

I was an international election observer for South Africa's historic 1994 elections, and I marveled at the commitment to equality and peace of the newly elected government.

Likewise, I was humbled by the opportunity to be within a voting booth when a voter was asked for the first time whom he wished to vote for and he would know only the name "Mandela."

When I arrived Friday, I slowly descended the steps from the plane and felt the cool sea breeze blowing across the cape — a place where the Indian and Atlantic oceans meet.

A tall Black Jamaican sighed, as if letting out in one breath centuries of oppression, "Ah ... Africa," he exclaimed. He knelt on the pavement and kissed the ground — an act likely to have been repeated over the past few years by the many Africans driven into exile by the horrors of apartheid.

From atop the many hills in Cape Town you can see Robbens Island, the former prison home of now-President Mandela, who spent much of his 27 years behind bars on that wind-swept strip of land. I stood and just stared for some time, remembering his words: "Freedom is indivisible — the chains on any one of my people were the chains on all of them; the chains on all of my people were the chains on me. (But) to be free is not merely to cast off one's chains but to live in a way that respects and enhances the freedom of others."

Tonight I sit in Cape Town on a new journey to the new South Africa. I have joined with hundreds of lawyers from around the world who have come to examine challenges for

law and lawyers in the next millennium, and I begin my next Southern Africa project — the National Lawyers Guild's International Truth and Reconciliation Commission Monitoring project.

As part of the transitional power-sharing agreement that led to the elections, the new Parliament was mandated to grant limited amnesty for certain crimes committed under apartheid.

The work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission is aimed at exposing the truth about the years of oppression, providing an avenue for victims to tell their stories and seek reparations and provide amnesty for those who reveal their actions during apartheid.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu heads the commission and points out that its hearings are intended to "be part of the process for healing of the nation ... since every South African has to some extent or other been traumatized."

A failure on the part of those accused of crimes to seek amnesty or to appear before the commission could result in prosecution, and it appears that the lines are being drawn by those who don't wish to admit to their actions and those who want the guilty punished.

Nearly 3,000 amnesty applications have been received, and I will be attending the first hearings in mid-April.

So for me this trip is about truth and reconciliation. We have much to learn in our own country about settling conflict in a way that is healing and not based upon vengeance or retribution. Today, I have the honor of meeting President Mandela and beginning the process of listening well to these sages of equality and peace-making.

In the weeks ahead I hope to share some of this journey in search of the truth with all of you in Albuquerque and trust that you too will be moved by this heroic effort at reconciliation and forgiveness.

As I heard Justice Minister Dullah Omar declare, truth "must become part of our history."

"We wish to forgive but not forget."