

Robben Island is Seen by Many as South Africa's Cradle of Democracy

Terry Crawford-Browne

[Back to Previous Page](#)

Once a place of banishment, Robben Island five miles off the coast of Cape Town has become almost a shrine for hundreds of thousands of visitors to South Africa.

Throughout recorded time, the island has been a place of banishment: convicts, political prisoners from the Dutch and British colonies, the mentally handicapped, lepers and again — from 1961 until 1990 — political prisoners. Former South African president Nelson Mandela spent 19 of the 27 years of his imprisonment on Robben Island.

The limestone quarry worked by the prisoners became, surreptitiously, a place of learning and of political debate and, consequently, is nicknamed the University of Robben Island. The Island has recently been designated by UNESCO as a World Heritage Site, and is now annually visited by over 200,000 foreign tourists.

Despite its inauspicious past, Robben Island is increasingly regarded as the cradle of South Africa's new democracy, a place of transformation from its image of despair to a symbol of hope and peace. Half a mile from the prison and quarry is the Church of the Good Shepherd, also known as the Leper Church.

Built in 1895, when there were about 500 leprosy* patients quarantined on the Island in appalling conditions, the Church was abandoned in 1931 when the patients were forcibly removed. By then, they had come to regard the island as their home. The Church was restored last year, and re-consecrated in November by the Anglican Archbishop of Cape Town, the Most Revd Njongonkulu Ndungane who was, himself, a political prisoner on Robben Island during the 1960s.

The Archbishop then dedicated the Church as a "place of pilgrimage, a symbol of the whole world of God's power to heal and to transform." It is intended that in addition to being a place of prayer, the Church will be used as a venue for workshops open to all "who seek and foster global peace and the healing, reconciliation and unity of all human beings."

The first such workshop took place on Sunday, March 5. The Accord (African Centre for the Constructive Resolution of Disputes) in conjunction with the Royal Netherlands Embassy in Khartoum brought 36 women from strife-torn Sudan to South Africa for nine days training in conflict resolution skills.

Representing Muslim, Christian and Animist communities, the Sudanese Women's Civil Society network for Peace studied post-conflict processes of the South African transition including a day on Robben Island.

The Coalition for Defence Alternatives was privileged to arrange the training venue, and to speak about its advocacy of demilitarization and reduction of spending on armaments. Africa is awash with weapons supplied by the "First World" to military dictators and warlords. The economic consequences have been devastating, including worsening poverty, refugees, and the spread of HIV/AIDS.

People from other NGOs spoke of the need for human security relating to people in contrast to the traditional notions of military security relating to states. Representatives from the Gun Free South Africa Campaign spoke of efforts to reverse the proliferation of small arms, including pending gun control legislation.

Women and children are disproportionately the casualties of the wars that afflict Africa, hence the recognition that networks of women must take the lead in the advocacy of peace.

Conflicts in Sudan, Nigeria and elsewhere in Africa are immensely aggravated by religious tensions, especially relating to fundamentalism. Christian and Muslim leaders spoke at the workshop of the inter-faith as well as cross-cultural collaboration in South Africa in the common struggle against apartheid.

Father Michael Lapsley — long-time activist against apartheid who in 1990 lost both hands and an eye to a letter bomb — spoke about the healing of memories and of the need of survivors of such atrocities to overcome their bitterness.

Africa — for the past five centuries the poorest and most marginalized of the world's continents — is beginning to grapple in hope for an African renaissance. The Church of the Good Shepherd, Robben Island, intends to contribute to that process. Footnote: The Coalition for Defence Alternatives is a forum of individuals and non-governmental organizations which aims to provide a critical response to defense and military issues. ECAAR-SA serves on the Executive Committee, and Terry Crawford-Browne as a Co-Convenor.

Footnote: The Coalition for Defence Alternatives is a forum of individuals and non-governmental organizations which aims to provide a critical response to defense and military issues. ECAAR-SA serves on the Executive Committee, and Terry Crawford-Browne as a Co-Convenor.

* Leprosy is also referred to as Hansens Disease. Thanks to new multi-drug treatments, the number of patients around the world has fallen dramatically in recent years to about 1.2 million. The World Health Organisation announced in November 1999 that it has allocated US\$100 million to eradicate leprosy by the year 2005.

A Note From Terry Crawford-Browne:

“The Heath Unit had publicly committed to a finding by the end of January. It is now the end of [April]. They are themselves fighting for their political lives because they are on the brink of exposing massive governmental corruption, apparently including the President’s brother. So the pressure is on them simply to brush it all under the carpet. Various journalists have also been ‘warned off.’ ”

Economists for Peace and Security

<http://www.epsusa.org>