

UNIVERSITY OF CAPE TOWN – 10th DECEMBER 2007

HONORARY DEGREE: AUNG SAN SUU KYI

What an incredible honour to have been asked to receive this honorary doctorate on behalf of a remarkable woman, Aunt San Suu Kyi.

I have been called some strange things and thought to resemble certain persons. Some youngsters asked to identify public personalities all had no difficulty correctly identifying Nelson Mandela. After much head scratching a bright young thing raised his hand and when asked who it was in the picture, declared the “Pink Panther”. And you might recall the lady in San Francisco who greeted me effusively, “Hallo, Archbishop Mandela”. No one in their right mind and with decent eyesight could ever imagine that I could resemble the elegant, petite Aung San Suu Kyi. I don’t have pin ups anymore – but I made an exception in her case. I have two of her pictures in my office. Yes, she undoubtedly is my pin up.

Thank you, University of Cape Town for bestowing your highest honour on this extraordinary individual. This prestigious and pre-eminent institute of higher learning in many ways honours itself in thus honouring her. Now we do have incontrovertible evidence that goodness, that nobility of spirit, that all the good things we can enumerate clearly trump their ghastly counterparts. It is quite ridiculous really. We see vicious men armed to the teeth running scared of a petite, gorgeous creature totally unarmed, recognised for her commitment to peace by the award of the Nobel Peace Prize. She alone of all Nobel Peace laureates languishes under house arrest as she has done for twelve out of the last eighteen years. She has led her National League for Democracy to a resounding election, indeed a landslide victory, in 1990, which the military dictatorship has chosen to ignore.

She has been a wonderful source of inspiration to her embattled people as we saw in those heartwarming, peaceful demonstrations in September which the junta put down with ruthless brutality. She has, even so, not swerved from the path of reconciliation, non-violence and accommodation. She makes us proud to be human as Madiba, as the Dalai Lama, as Mother Theresa, as Martin Luther King Jr., as Mahatma Gandhi have, in their turn, made us feel proud to be human, making us want to emulate them, emulate her. No wonder some have said she was indeed the Madiba of Burma and which is why the Elders placed an empty chair for her when she comes out of her house arrest as she surely will.

She depends on us, the Burmese depend on us, and she said, “Use your freedom to help us gain ours”. We South Africans know what it is to have your freedom denied in your own land. We know too just how we were supported in our struggle against the viciousness of apartheid by the international community. We would not be free today if the UN Security Council, the General Assembly, had not taken our cause to heart and imposed sanctions on the apartheid regime. We call for a similar concerted international campaign calling for the release of all political prisoners including Aung San Suu Kyi, realistic inclusive negotiations with clear deadlines for drawing up a constitution and for yet another round of free and fair elections monitored by the international community so that Burma can become the vibrant, prosperous, bread basket of the region instead of a disaster area. We call on all, especially China, India and ASEAN to help bring this about. That as the least we can do for the person we are honoring today.