



# Travails, Trips and Travels

By Don Eliseo Lucero Prisno III

## Reliving South Africa's Robben Island

**S**outh Africa has always been in political turmoil for most of its recent past. Finally, after ousting their former President Thabo Mbeki, the country has elected its new leader in the person of Jacob Zuma. He may not be a promising politician; nevertheless I respect the people who elected him. I suppose they had no choice. I wish the country much luck with its new leadership.

Much of South Africa's post-apartheid leadership has been shaped in one of its famous islands, the Robben Island. Just a few kilometres away from the picturesque city of Cape Town, this island has been a prison for many of the country's important black political prisoners and detainees during the apartheid period. The island has been home to three of South Africa's Presidents—Nelson Mandela, Kgalema Motlanthe and Jacob Zuma. It also cradled many important black political figures who shaped the history of the country including the father of Thabo Mbeki and Robert Sobukwe (founder of the Pan Africanist Congress). Thus, the island becomes a very strong symbol of political struggle and everything wrong about apartheid.

I visited Robben Island during my recent trip to South Africa. It was a must for me to relive the experiences of those people who struggled against the evils of apartheid. It was an answer to my question on why the concept has produced four South African Nobel Peace laureates—Albert Lutuli (1960), Desmond Tutu (1984), Nelson Mandela (1993) and F.W. de Klerk (1993).

Apartheid was an official policy of the South African government separating the whites from the black based on the belief that these different races cannot live together. Despite the majority of the black population, the white was the dominant force in the country. There were different services provided for the blacks. Services for the white were always better. Blacks were even stripped of their citizenships. This resulted into dissent by many black people. Many of its leaders were banished to Robben Island. As part of the policy, only black males were imprisoned in the island. Women and white were incarcerated in other jails of the country. Of course, the prison guards were all whites.

While walking through the hallways of the prison, I understood the misery of those who stayed in it. Rooms are small, accommodations are cramped and living conditions are squalid. I felt that the punishment was so grave for having a remonstrance against the political pol-



Heavily fortified prison built by prisoners



Sobukwe house



Criminals sleeping quarter



icy. Many prisoners stayed in such inhuman conditions for a decade.

Within the prison, political prisoners were separated from the criminals. The former who were more learned were not allowed to educate the mostly illiterate criminals. Nonetheless, they did it in a clandestine manner. This is how Zuma got his education. Relatives were only allowed to visit for thirty minutes every six months. During these visits they are not allowed to touch each other. Neither could they hear audibly with thick glass panels and a very tight security. It was a maximum security prison. They were totally separated from the society. They were not allowed to read any material carrying news from the outside. Those who were summoned to serve as helpers in the island households would steal newspapers and books which were given to the political prisoners. This was the most common 'crime' on the island.

The prisoners were subjected to harsh labour conditions. They were made to build the prison buildings themselves. They would quarry lime stones and break rocks. These white stones reflected very strong light which caused pain on their eyes. Working in such conditions for

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a decade resulted into the deterioration of their eyesight.

For many centuries now, the island has been used for many purposes. Its location made it an ideal place for the isolation of lepers, animal quarantine, military guard to protect Cape Town, aside from being a prison. During the Dutch rule, even Indonesians were sent here to be incarcerated. Women with venereal diseases were sentenced to be jailed here in 1815. The continuous occupation of the island saw the decline in animal species such as penguins which were hunted for food. Fresh water has been depleted after its table water has been



Priso in prison



Prisoner wash area

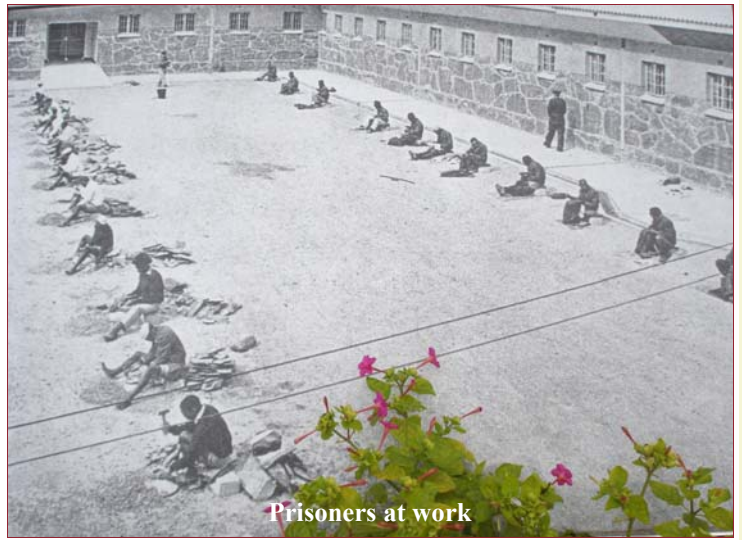
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GEVONNISTE GEVANGENE  
SENTENCED PRISONER

Groep Group Geloof Religion OPMERKINGS REMARKS	No. 69/64 Raad No. 1/5341. Naam Billy Nair. Name Misdad Sabotasie. Crime Vonnis 20 Jaar G/S. Sentence Datum van vonnis 28/2/64. Date of sentence Datum van ontslag 27/2/84. Date of discharge
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Druk—THUMB IMPRESSION

Prisoner ID



Prisoners at work



Inhospitable surroundings



Penguins on the beach

drained dry for local consumption. At present, the island has water pipes connected to the mainland.

Today the Robben Island is now a museum. It was declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1999, five years after the lifting of the apartheid. Thousands of visitors visit Robben Island every year. It features a guided bus tour which shows the local settlement, the prison, the vestiges of war, its harsh conditions, and of course the lovely penguin inhabitants which were reintroduced.

The island museum remains a testament honouring the contributions and sacrifices of many people. It moves us as a humanity to renew our commitment towards respect for race and the upholding of human equality. It inspires us to live together in peace. It draws our attention on not having more unwanted prisons and political prisoners.