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PRIME MINISTER

FOR MEDIA

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Monday 18 July is the 70th birthday of Nelson Mandela. Tragically, as with so many of his other birthdays, he will be celebrating it in gaol.

I would like to use the occasion to appeal once again to the South African Government to release unconditionally Mandela and the numerous other political prisoners who have been gaoled for their opposition to apartheid.

The release of the prisoners would be an important gesture of goodwill by the South African Government and could have a role in laying the basis for negotiations leading to the peaceful abolition of apartheid and the establishment in South Africa of a just society.

The situation in South Africa is tragic and will not endure indefinitely. It is in the interest of South Africa and the world that it be resolved peacefully. Bold action by the South African Government, such as the release of Nelson Mandela, will be necessary to achieve this and would be applauded by Australia and other members of the international community.

I have sent the following message to Nelson Mandela himself:

"On the occasion of your 70th birthday please accept my personal best wishes and those of the Australian Government and people.

In 1985, you described your period of imprisonment as "long, lonely, wasted years". In terms of their impact on world views about your people's suffering, however, your long, lonely years have not been wasted.

Your years in gaol are a constant reminder to us of the abhorrent impact of apartheid, not only on you, personally, but also on the many lesser known people, including children, who continue to be gaoled and to suffer daily under that system. It is a tremendous tribute to you that, after so many years in gaol, you are still regarded by South African blacks as the symbol of their struggle for freedom.

Your courage in withstanding the privation of the prison system and your determination to maintain your commitment to the freedom of your people, even at the expense of your own freedom, have been an inspiration not only in South Africa but to people throughout the world.

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Your refusal to become embittered and your consistent willingness to negotiate with all parties the possible future of a free, democratic, non-racial South Africa are characteristics greatly admired here in Australia.

The Australian Government is deeply concerned over the continuing polarisation of politics within South Africa, the banning of political groups, the constraints on free trade union activity, the muzzling of the press, and the detention of so many whose only offence is their courageous determination to strive for a better future for their people.

As a first step towards achieving the political and social reconciliation that this will require, Australia, along with other members of the international community, has long been calling for the release of all political prisoners. That message was central to the Nassau Accord on Southern Africa, agreed by Commonwealth leaders in 1985 and was given the highest importance by the Eminent Persons Group.

We will continue to call on the South African Government to release you unconditionally. Such action would be seen by the world as an act of hope and as a measure of the readiness of the South African authorities to take the necessary first steps away from confrontation and violence.

For our part, Australia and Australians will continue to do what we can to impress on the South African Government the need to enter negotiations to put an end to apartheid. I was pleased to be able to talk about these and other matters with ANC President, Oliver Tambo, when he visited Australia in 1987.

It is my sincere hope that you will be able to take part in such negotiations and to see the beginnings of real movement towards the goal for which you have worked so hard and given up so much.

My support and sympathy go out to you and to the family and friends who you have been isolated for so long. I can assure you that many of us in Australia will be thinking of you and of the other political prisoners in South Africa on the day of your birthday."