

Nelson Mandela:

Activist, Politician, 1993 Nobel Peace Prize Winner

Who is Nelson Mandela? Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela was born in Transkei, South Africa, on July 18, 1918. His father was Chief Henry Mandela of the Tembu tribe. Nelson Mandela is a black African. In his native country, a political system of apartheid was in place for many years.

Apartheid consisted of laws that allowed the ruling white minority in South Africa to segregate, exploit and terrorize the non-white majority: Africans, Asians and people of mixed race. In white-ruled South Africa, non-whites were denied basic human and political rights. Their labour was exploited, their entire lives segregated.

Under apartheid, any criticism of the law was suppressed. Apartheid was a racist political system that dictated to non-whites in the smallest of details where they could live, work and die. The political system defied the principles of the United Nations Charter and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. South Africa was condemned around the world for its oppressive racist regime.

At the age of twenty-six, Mandela joined the African National Congress (ANC), a political party of non-white South Africans, to fight against the government's apartheid policies. The ANC was outlawed by South Africa's governing National Party of whites. A frustrated Mandela declared that if the ANC could not legally exist in South Africa, violence and armed force would be needed to achieve equality for non-whites.

Mandela made many enemies within the white government, and he attracted a great deal of media attention. He was called the "Black Pimpernel" for his ability to evade the white police by wearing disguises; his favourite was dressing as a chauffeur.

Mandela was arrested in 1962 for his connection to ANC violence. He was convicted and sentenced to five years' imprisonment with hard labour. In 1963 Mandela was placed on trial with other members of the ANC for plotting to violently overthrow the government. On June 12, 1964 he was sentenced to life imprisonment.

During his years in prison, Mandela's reputation grew. He was recognized as the most significant black leader in South Africa and a powerful symbol of resistance for the anti-apartheid movement. He consistently refused to compromise his political position to obtain freedom.

Following years of international political pressure, Mandela was released after serving twenty-eight years in prison on February 11, 1990. In 1991 he was elected president of the ANC, and in 1994 he became the first non-white democratically elected president of South Africa.

In 1993 Mandela was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize along with then South Africa President Frederik Willem de Klerk.. The two men, one black and one white, were jointly accorded the honour "for their work for the peaceful termination of the apartheid regime, and for laying the foundations for a new democratic South Africa."

Information taken and adapted from the Nobel Peace Prize website, April 10th, 2008:
http://nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/peace/laureates/1993/mandela-bio.html
and the UN website on Apartheid: <http://www.un.org/av/photo/subjects/apartheid.htm>.