

Nelson Mandela, anti-apartheid icon and father of modern South Africa, dies

By Faith Karimi, CNN

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(CNN) -- Freedom fighter, statesman, moral compass and South Africa's symbol of the struggle against racial oppression. That was Nelson Mandela, who emerged from prison after 27 years to lead his country out of decades of apartheid.

He died Thursday night at age 95.

His message of forgiveness, not vengeance, inspired the world after he negotiated a peaceful end to segregation and urged forgiveness for the white government that imprisoned him.

"As I walked out the door toward the gate that would lead to my freedom, I knew if I didn't leave my bitterness and hatred behind, I'd still be in prison," Mandela said after he was freed in in 1990.

Mandela, a former president, battled health issues in recent years, including a recurring lung infection that led to numerous hospitalizations.

Despite rare public appearances, he held a special place in the consciousness of the nation and the world.

"Our nation has lost its greatest son. Our people have lost a father," South African President Jacob Zuma said. "What made Nelson Mandela great was precisely what made him human. We saw in him what we seek in ourselves."

His U.S. counterpart, Barack Obama, echoed the same sentiment.

We've lost one of the most influential, courageous and profoundly good human beings that any of us will share time with on this earth," Obama said. "He no longer belongs to us. He belongs with the ages."

Mandela became the nation's conscience as it healed from the scars of apartheid. His defiance of white minority rule and long incarceration for fighting against

segregation focused the world's attention on apartheid, the legalized racial segregation enforced by the South African government until 1994.

In his lifetime, he was a man of complexities. He went from a militant freedom fighter, to a prisoner, to a unifying figure, to an elder statesman. Years after his 1999 retirement from the presidency, Mandela was considered the ideal head of state. He became a yardstick for African leaders, who consistently fell short when measured against him.

Warm, lanky and charismatic in his silk, earth-toned dashikis, he was quick to admit to his shortcomings, endearing him further in a culture in which leaders rarely do.

His steely gaze disarmed opponents. So did his flashy smile.

Former South African President F.W. de Klerk, who was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize with Mandela in 1993 for transitioning the nation from a system of racial segregation, described their first meeting.

"I had read, of course, everything I could read about him beforehand. I was well-briefed," he said.

"I was impressed, however, by how tall he was. By the ramrod straightness of his stature, and realized that this is a very special man. He had an aura around him. He's truly a very dignified and a very admirable person."

For many South Africans, he was simply Madiba, his traditional clan name. Others affectionately called him Tata, the word for father in his Xhosa tribe.

With him gone, South Africans are left to embody his promise and idealism.