

'The people's hero' honoured at 13th Biko public lecture

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UNWAVERING COMMITMENT: Dr Pali Lehohla during his keynote address at the 13th Steve Biko public lecture at Nelson Mandela University south campus auditorium on Tuesday

Steve Biko, visionary founder of the Black Consciousness Movement, is celebrated as a towering figure who seamlessly blended theory, practice, empathy, and an indomitable revolutionary spirit.

Despite the perilous risks posed by the apartheid regime, Biko's unwavering commitment and sacrifice propelled the struggle forward, making it a cause that transcended all boundaries.

These sentiments were expressed by former SA statistician-general Dr Pali Lehohla during his keynote address at the 13th Steve Biko public lecture at Nelson Mandela University (NMU) in the south campus auditorium on Tuesday.

Lehohla said there had been several issues Biko had to address in an interview with a reporter three months before he was murdered, one of which was black consciousness.

"The night of the interview provided important pointers towards understanding what he faced as the biggest precipice of our time."

Other subjects included black consciousness and Christianity, black people's convention, homelands, communism, SA and the US, black communalism, the role of foreign individuals, and Dr Beyers Naudé.

Lehohla said Biko had cut through different subjects with incredible clarity.

"On the birth of black consciousness he ably advanced the idea of cultural and political revival as an important first step for black people to liberate themselves," he said.

"He emphasised the cultural birth of black consciousness in that it forced black people to ask themselves who they really were.

"It was a special tool in the context of the demise and visibility of white people where the nakedness of their brutality got revealed dramatically."

Lehohla said SA was faced with a moral and social crisis which could be attributed to poverty and inequality, which he said had deepened further.

“Corruption on the other hand is strangling our economy and with the highest levels of unemployment in the world, the majority of citizens are excluded from a productive economy.”

He said almost three decades into freedom, social ills had worsened instead of improving.

NMU vice-chancellor Sibongile Muthwa said as they revisited Biko’s teachings, they had to recommit to advancing an inclusive society and to position institutions of higher learning in particular as safe spaces free of discrimination, exclusion and fear.

“We need to do this unapologetically without needing to qualify our blackness because the desire for freedom and justice for ourselves is a necessary prerequisite for wanting the same freedom for others.”

Biko’s son, Nkosinathi Biko, said he was grateful for all the engagements and commemorations that had taken place across the country and abroad.

He said they continued to invigorate his father’s legacy by revisiting his teachings and activism.