

# Remembering The Past & Living The Present

by **Janet Jagan**

South Africa has been fortunate to have had support from within the section of its population which in the past had enforced and practised the policies of Apartheid, perhaps the world's worst example of racial segregation. From its White community, there have been many outspoken protagonists of an end to the Apartheid system and quite a few who put their lives at risk in the long protracted struggle by the people of South Africa for its freedom. Joe Slovo and his wife Ruth First (who died as a result of a package bomb sent to her), religious leaders of all races and writers like Nadene Gordimer as well as lawyers and judges played their part and made positive contributions. Names like Rev

Huddleston, Bram Fischer and others come to mind. Fisher, I believe, died in prison.

One judge, Richard Goldstone, used his position during the Apartheid years to challenge the system. For example, he ruled that "people of colour" could not be ejected from a designated "White" residential area if they had no alternative accommodation, thus challenging one of the pillars of racial segregation. In another decision, he ordered the security police to return seized material to the "Release Mandela Campaign." He is also reputed to have had the courage to visit thousands of political activists being held in detention without trial, no doubt saving many from abuse or torture. (Source: *Time Magazine*, 12/11/00).



*Nelson Mandela and Ruth First, c. 1958*

If we do a comparison with the struggles in South Africa to ours, we can see many similarities; for example, in recent years the clergy, as in South Africa, has been supportive of the people's struggles for democracy, mainly during the years of PNC rule. Many church leaders have come forward, in the face of strong attacks, to support the restoration of

democracy and an end to fraudulent elections.

However, in Guyana, we never had those associated with the ruling class during the colonial period coming out to support the independence movement. And obviously, no one associated with the PNC ruling clique ever risked denouncing that regime's denial of human rights and the rights of the

voters to elect a government of their choice.

We can ask a pertinent question: Have we ever had the good fortune to have someone like Judge Goldstone in our judicial system? The answer we all know. For that matter, we have had much too much of the antithesis of Goldstone.

Judge Goldstone headed a Commission that produced enough evidence of human rights abuses during the final Apartheid years to justify the establishment of South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission. The Commission unearthed many of the horrors of Apartheid. The De Klerk Government had opposed the establishment of a Truth Commission but Judge Goldstone produced enough evidence of criminal acts to justify this Commission.

Maybe such a Commission should have been established after the 1992 elections in Guyana. There has been continuing evidence of numerous criminal acts by the PNC during its 28 years of illegal rule to justify such a Commission. The late president Cheddi Jagan felt that reconciliation and national unity could be jeopardized by such a Commission which would systematically investigate all the wrong doings of the PNC regime which led to the mass exodus of the people (now there are more Guyanese living overseas than in Guyana) and the wreckage of the economy. In his altruism, he did not anticipate that such magnanimity might be appreciated by the majority of people, but has little effect on a recalcitrant PNC.