

Obama salutes Madiba

US President Barack Obama used the official dinner hosted in his honour on Saturday to make a moving toast to former President Nelson Mandela.



Delegates at the dinner observed a moment of silence for Mandela, who has been in hospital since 8 June.

Although he shared light moments, Obama said "our minds and hearts are not fully here because a piece of us, a piece of our heart is with a man and family not far from here". The US President was referring to Mandela, who is in a hospital that less than 2km away from the Sefako Mapogo Makgatho Presidential Guest House where the dinner was held.

He offered the family words of comfort and praised the former statesman as one of history's greatest.

Obama has sought to amplify US-Africa trade and commercial ties through his three-nation tour of Africa, which began in Senegal. However, concerns over Mandela's health have weighed heavily not only on South Africa, but also on the US President.

Obama said the sacrifices made by Mandela and South African freedom fighters resonated in the US, as that country has its own civil rights movement.

"I wouldn't be here if not for freedom fighters... We are inspired by you to believe that anything is possible."

Obama went on to recite the words of the poem *Invictus* by William Ernest Henley, words that Madiba often turned to in his cell on Robben Island, which speak of the triumph of the human spirit.

Obama proposed a toast to the man he said "has always been the master of his fate, who taught us that we can be master of ours".

Earlier in the day, Obama took time out of his busy schedule to visit the family of the ailing icon at the Nelson Mandela Foundation in Houghton. He also had a telephone conversation with Mandela's wife, Graca Machel, who is with the elderly former statesman in hospital.

Doctors have described Madiba's condition as stable but critical.

After spending private time with Mandela's family members, President Obama then viewed a display of materials from Mandela's private papers. He also wished the family, the Nelson Mandela charities and all South Africans well at this difficult time.

President Zuma expressed gratitude to the Obamas for their prayers and good wishes for Mandela.

"As you have correctly pointed out, he is also a personal hero to all of us here tonight. And so, as we celebrate our friendship, we are also keeping Madiba in our thoughts."

"He reminds us of so many special leaders who have played crucial roles in our intertwined histories, such as Martin Luther King and Oliver Reginald Tambo.

"They taught us that freedom comes at a price and it needs a continuous collective effort to ensure its rewards," said Zuma.

Delegates included Deputy President Kgalema Motlanthe and his partner, ministers, their deputies, some premiers as well as members of Parliament and the chief justice.

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