

SACBC STATEMENT

ON

AN END TO CONSCRIPTION (9/5/85)

Our concern as bishops in Southern Africa is for a speedy and just solution to the problems experienced by the people of South Africa and Namibia, a solution in which all sectors of the population are called to play their part.

In our 1982 report on Namibia we drew attention to the fact that the majority of Namibians regard the South African Defence Force as an army of occupation which hinders the granting of independence to that country in terms of Resolution 435 of the United Nations Security Council.

During the unrest in the Vaal and East Rand townships in late 1984 the army was deployed in a support capacity to the South African Police operating in those areas. This action was greeted with shock and horror by the inhabitants of those townships and by other South Africans concerned about how and where the army is deployed.

This use of the army to enforce 'law and order' within the country was further extended in 1985 to include the townships in the Eastern Cape, in spite of all the protest that the legitimate use of an army is in the defence of the country against its enemies.

Many young men who are conscripted each year into the South African Defence Force experience crises of conscience as they become aware of the role that they are being expected to play in the black townships, and elsewhere in South Africa. In our 1977 statement "On Conscientious Objection" which we issued in our concern for the nature of the armed struggle and escalating violence in Southern Africa, we defended the right of every individual to follow his own conscience; the right therefore to conscientious objection both on the grounds of universal pacificism and on the grounds that a person may seriously believe the war to be unjust.

We believe that a serious decision of this nature is a moral judgement and must be made after deep and prayerful examination of the facts available. In 1977 we urged the South African government to make provision for alternative forms of non-military national service, as is found in other parts of the world. Sixty-six countries do not have conscription.

In 1983, in a letter to the Minister of Defence about the proposed Defence Amendment Act, Cardinal McCann, on our behalf, pointed out to the Minister that the proposed amendments, making it possible for Christian pacifists to refuse military training, did not go far enough. Provision should also be made for so-called moral or ethical objectors. At that time we stated that if such an amendment was not included in the Defence Amendment Act we would find it necessary to reject the Act as unjust.

Our suggested amendment was not included in the Defence Amendment Act. The situation in South Africa has continued to deteriorate and in 1985 we find ourselves in a situation of grave crisis.

We are concerned at the growing number of young men faced with a crisis of conscience caused by their conscription. The choices for them are:

- ❖ Serving in an army with whose mode of operation they cannot agree;
- ❖ Doing six years alternative service if they are recognised as religious pacifists;
- ❖ Serving a six year goal sentence if they object to the war on the grounds that they believe it unjust;
- ❖ Leaving the country and living in exile.

They are faced with these choices because of the system of compulsory conscription in South Africa, which does not prevail in most other countries around the world.

We recognise that an end to conscription would leave membership of the South African Defence Force open to those who are in sympathy with it and would grant individuals freedom of conscience in determining their response to the situation. Therefore we join our voices with those who have already asked for an end to conscription. We call on the government to amend the Defence Act to make this possible. We also encourage Catholics to help promote peace by working for an end to conscription in whatever ways lie open to them.