

SACBC STATEMENT

ON

DETAINEES' RELEASE REGULATIONS (14/04/87)

The Church could not and would not tolerate government dictating what the Church could or could not pray, or hold services for. The Church also did not want any favours which could allow it to campaign legally for the release of detainees for the Southern African catholic Bishops' Conference "is horrified by government measures aimed at outlawing all and any actions on behalf of those unjustly deprived of their liberty," Conference president Bishop Wilfred Napier said: "The intention is clearly to muzzle all who expose or are opposed to the ever-increasing erosion of civil liberties in South Africa. These latest restrictions are draconian by any standards. But now they affect the work of the Church directly in that they presume to determine what the Church can or cannot do in its care for those in need.

"This we cannot and will not tolerate for to do so would be to abdicate our responsibility as ministers of the Gospel. It is our God-given duty to do and say what the Lord Himself did and commanded, especially when he described His and His Church's mission as being:

- To bring good news to the poor
- To proclaim liberty to captives
- To give the blind new sight
- To set the downtrodden free
- To proclaim the Lord's year of favour (Lk4:18, Isaiah: 61).

In the present circumstances we can only repeat the declaration of St. Peter on behalf of the Church when put under similar restrictions: We must obey God rather than men (Acts 4: 29).

"We again warn against the government abuse of powers in this way, and call on it to abandon its policy of serving the interests of one section of the community only. We urge it to address with earnestness and determination the task of securing the good of all the people of South Africa, regardless of race or colour. Not only is that the just and fair and Christian thing to do, it is also the only way to lasting peace – the peace which is God's gift to those who seek it with sincere and contrite heart."

Reacting to later reports that law and order authorities said it is **not** illegal for church services to be held for the release of detainees, Bishop Napier said:

"This has to be a confidence trick. The original regulations make no mention of exemption for churches. Anyway, we are not interested in securing any favours, but a just and fair deal for all. One wonders why the government does not wish to enforce the prohibition on the Church. Is it afraid that it has to face the wrath of Christians on election day who will not tolerate a government that usurps the right to decide the matters for which Christians may pray to their God? The reported explanation (exempting churches) is clearly intended to create a convenient loophole to avoid having to act against senior Church leaders such as Archbishop Denis Hurley,

Archbishop Desmond Tutu and Archbishop Stephen Naidoo who have participated or will participate in church services for detainees.

“To say that campaigns by individuals are not illegal is to misrepresent the substance and the letter of the regulations as published. A person wearing a T-shirt or displaying a sticker against detention cannot be a mass demonstration, yet this is explicitly prohibited, according to the *Government Gazette*. We are not concerned with the latest explanations. We have seen it happen before: Imposition of strict restrictions followed by back-peddalling, and later, stricter enforcement once the dust has settled. The government has made a serious mistake. It should do the only honourable thing and scrap the new regulations in its entirety.”