

SACBC STATEMENT

ON

MEETING WITH THE STATE PRESIDENT (17/11/86)

A meeting held between a deputation from the South African Catholic Bishops' Conference and the South African State President, P.W. Botha, on the crisis in the country served no real purpose. The president of the Conference, Archbishop D. E. Hurley of Durban reported a frustrating, unsatisfactory meeting. "No specific purpose was achieved nor was any objective visible in the course of the discussion" lasting nearly two hours.

Cardinal Own McCann, Archbishop Stephen Naidoo of Cape Town, Archbishop George Daniel of Pretoria, Archbishop Peter Butelezi of Bloemfontein and Bishop Wilfred Napier (Vice-president of the Conference) met with Minister of Constitutional Development Chris Heunis, Defence Minister Magnus Malan, Minister of Law and Order Adriaan Vlok among others.

The bishops said they tried to emphasise that unless fundamental pillars of apartheid were dismantled, violence in the country would increase. However, the State President did not address this issue but rather responded by stressing his government's commitment to reform, which he felt was welcomed by most black South Africans in the face of the communist threat; that the situation in the country was under control and that substantial reforms had taken place.

The government felt that the situation in the country was under control and that substantial reforms had taken place. The state president said that when the National Party came to power only 20 000 blacks had the vote whereas today 50 percent of the black population had the right to vote. – it was not clear whether the state president was referring to homeland and township councils which had a notably poor voting record.

According to the bishops the government appeared particularly concerned about the danger of communism and the banned African National Congress, which, the state president believed was controlled by the communist party in England. *The New Nation* newspaper, sponsored by the South African Catholic Bishops' Conference was also mentioned in this light. The government accused the newspaper of promoting communist ideals such as liberation theology, women's rights and the Kairos Document.

Detention without trial

One of the main items on the agenda for the meeting with the state president was the continued detention without trial of thousands of South Africans, including many clergy and the Secretary General of the South African Catholic Bishops' Conference, father Smangaliso Mkhathshwa. The bishops said there was no reaction from the government representatives on this issue. They only reiterated their point that political interference from Church people will not be tolerated.

Archbishop Hurley pointed out that the November 17 judgement on the application for the release of Father Mkhathshwa was the fourth time the South African Catholic Bishops' Conference had failed to have their secretary general released from prison. He has been held since June 12, when State of Emergency regulations were introduced.

The Bishops' Conference had applied for Father Mkhathshwa's release on the basis that he was being held in bad faith as it was claimed he had been tortured by members of the South African Security Forces. The Pretoria Supreme Court ruled that assault on a detainee did not render the detention unlawful and therefore his release was not justified. The judge said that official representation should have been made directly to the Minister of Law and Order. Attempts continue to have Father Mkhathshwa and other detainees released.