

## **SACBC STATEMENT**

### **ON**

### **SEBOKENG SIEGE (15/10/84)**

The South African Catholic Bishops' Conference described the army and police operation in Sebokeng as an unwarranted military siege and expressed its utter disbelief at the action taken.

Instead of acting as the protectors of the people, the police and the army are now seen as the aggressors by openly invading the township and sealing it off for some hours.

The bishops also seriously question the reason for such an extreme act. According to information received from reliable sources in the area, the situation in the Vaal township of Sebokeng had been quiet for some days. As a result of the military offensive, hundreds of innocent people are arrested, many for minor offences such as not producing a reference book.

According to up-to-date information, soldiers put up tents on the streets and in the open areas of the township. Residents of Sebokeng were unable to move freely from one part of the township to another and some were arrested for not producing proof of employment while on their way to work.

The show of force, apparently geared at winning the hearts and minds of people, will be regarded as provocation and could produce a regrettable response which will deepen the tragedy. It is indeed distressing that history has not shown the authorities that the presence of the military and the police in an already volatile area, merely arouses the anger of the masses. The anger has often in the past been translated into violent terms.

We (the bishops) also view with deep scepticism the claim by the authorities that the people of Sebokeng considered the military presence as a 'blessing'. It seems far-fetched in the extreme, that any fair-minded people would welcome a military takeover. We hope and pray that the people's demands for justice be met and that the police and army withdraw from the area forthwith.

We would like to add our corporate voice as leaders of the Catholic Church in this country to the cry for a radical revision of an evil system that imprisons people in their own towns. We hope that by doing so it would encourage a positive response from the South African government.

According to unconfirmed reports, the township of Sharpeville was also cordoned off by the military and the police.