

SACBC STATEMENTS

ON

DETAINEES (2/2/89) (15/2/89) (16/2/89) (29/2/89)

The Southern African Catholics Bishops' Conference took cognizance of the message issued by Diepkloof detainees on 27/1/89, that said:

“We detainees, being held at the Johannesburg Prison under the State of Emergency, write to you. Some of us have been held for nearly three years without charge. We have now embarked on a hunger strike in an attempt to highlight our detention and the restrictions on our organisations and bodies.

“We have no other course but the one we have chosen. Twenty of us went on hunger strike this week. Each week there will be more joining in until all of us are on hunger strike. We will not stop this hunger strike until our release. We have tried all available means. We have gone to the courts; we have petitioned ministers in government; we have met representatives; to no avail. Many of us held are students whose school times have been severely disrupted. Others are bread winners whose homes have been shattered by this experience.

“We call on you as Christians and concerned individuals to bring our plight to all and to pressure the government to release us. We have committed no crimes and demand our release.”

The Bishops response said:

“Moved by the cry from the heart of Diepkloof detainees and conscious that their tragic plight is shared by many others we make our own their agonised call for release. Many of them, as the Diepkloof detainees indicate, have been held for nearly three years, a disastrously long period in the life of any person, disruptive of education and career, destructive of family life and economically ruinous.

“The state maintains that they are being held in the interests of law and order. We fail to detect any sign of the rule of law and any vestige of moral or social order in the privation of liberty imposed upon them and its attendant hardship and sufferings especially in regard to minors among the detainees.

“When people have recourse to hunger strikes to draw attention to their plight it is obvious that they have reached a grave state of desperation.

“We call upon the state authorities to remember the Christian values to which they so frequently appeal and to terminate the cruel and unchristian treatment of detainees.”

In response to further restrictions on peaceful protests the Bishops' Conference said on 15/2/89:

“It is with horror that we learn that government has once again arrogated to itself the right to decide on what is good and what is evil. Scripture tells us we must remember those in prison as though in prison with them. But the government now says that Christians may not express solidarity with those who suffer most in prison.

“The Catholic Church condemns in the strongest terms possible this further curtailment of religious and civil liberties in South Africa. We once again call for a speedy, humane and Christian solution to this tragic situation.”

The secretary general of the Southern African Catholic Bishops' Conference issued a statement on the meeting between church leaders and the Minister of Law and Order, Mr Adrian Vlok, in Cape Town on 16/2/89.

“During extensive discussions, church leaders emphasised that detention without trial and apartheid lay at the root of the present crisis. They said their immediate objective was to save lives and to secure the release of detainees.

“The church delegation comprised: Archbishop Desmond Tutu, Anglican Archbishop of Cape Town, Archbishop Stephen Naidoo, Catholic Archbishop of Cape Town, the Rev Frank Chikane, General Secretary of the South African Council of Churches, Dr Allan Boesak, Moderator of the NG Sendingkerk, Bishop Stanley Mogoba, President Bishop of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa, Archbishop Temba W Ntongana, Vice-president of the Council of Independent African Churches, Bishop Geoffrey Quinlan, Anglican Suffragan Bishop of Cape Town.

“The Minister of Law and Order's delegation included General Basie Smith, head of security police, Brigadier Leon Mellet and members of the minister's staff.

“Mr Vlok told the church leaders that he agreed with them that the death of a hunger striker would have consequences ‘too ghastly to contemplate’. He also said that he was giving his urgent and personal attention to the case of each detainee, starting with hunger strikers. He would consider each detention minutely and sympathetically.

“The church leaders came away with the Minister's assurance that a substantial number of detainees would be released in the next fortnight.

“The churchmen agreed to make a renewed appeal for suspension of the hunger strike during that period. To that end, the Minister agreed to allow the Rev Chikane to have access to hunger-strikers in hospital and to convey the appeal to them.

“The Minister said the existing call of church leaders, legal representatives and parents for an immediate suspension of the hunger strike had been helpful”.

On Sunday 29/1/89, the Bishops concelebrated Mass “for all those unjustly deprived of their liberty” and said:

“We remain committed to working for the release of all detainees. We are particularly concerned at this time with detainees who are on hunger strike, those that remain

incarcerated since the declaration of the state of emergency and the continued detention of children”.