

SOUTH AFRICAN BISHOPS' CONFERENCE

RETURNING HOME (APRIL 1990)

SOUTH AFRICAN COUNCIL OF CHURCHES

‘There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under heaven’
(Ecclesiastes 3:1)

Most South Africans know someone who has left our country – it may have been a brother, a sister, a fellow student, a son, or a member of your congregation. Some left because they were harassed and hounded and feared for their lives; many left to fight the evil of apartheid from outside the country; some left because they did not want to defend an unjust system; many left because they were convinced that they could not lead a normal life in an abnormal society. Sons and daughters who left as scholars have now become parents. For some of them, parents they left behind are now gone.

It is time for their return.

The South African Council of Churches, the South African Catholic Bishops' Conference and their member churches, because of their belief in Justice and Reconciliation, have, for decades, cared for families who were affected by political imprisonment. Now a Task Force consisting of the SACC, the SACBC and Community Organisations has been established to look at the possible return of those who have left the country.

There are many different categories of exiles:

1. Members of the Liberation Movement.
2. The trained and armed forces (soldiers) of the Liberation Movement.
3. Non-aligned groups; groups which are not aligned with any section of the Liberation Movement or organisations.
4. Groups which have defected from the Liberation Movement in exile.
5. Conscientious objectors.
6. Other South African exiles who left the country for reasons other than security considerations.

The legal position of exiles

Mr F W de Klerk's statement in February created a situation, where for the first time, the possible return of exiles became a reality. Mr de Klerk announced the unbanning of the ANC, the PAC and various banned or restricted organisations in South Africa, and the release of political prisoners who were serving sentences for offences related to the fact that these organisations were banned. Mr de Klerk also announced that the exiles could return home.

Mr de Klerk's initial statement was not clear. As a result of the Groote Schuur talks, a joint Government – ANC Working Group will investigate and expand on the definitions of political offences.

It is clear that the only way to resolve this matter is for the government to declare a general **amnesty for all exiles**.

It is time for their return.

The life of the South African exile

Accurate statistics of the numbers of South Africans in exile are not available. The ANC has set a figure of 20 000 within its ranks at present. We know that thousands of young men have left the country as conscientious objectors. We know that many, many thousands of South Africans in other groups wish to return home. South African exiles live mainly in the Frontline states, Europe and North America.

At a consultative meeting on Repatriation in Lusaka this year, Rev John Lamola, a South African exile said:

“Exile is a psychological cataclysm. It is death. As one flees from home, literally, one’s life ends, and a new unknown beginning emerges. A new unknown beginning in a strange foreign country, often with a hostile climate and a myriad of diseases and discomforts unknown at home.

“For those who end up in Europe, the scourge of racism, a general cultural alienation and a sense of worthlessness in the face of the laws of some of those countries, become their lot. It is a life of loneliness and humiliation. It is lived in a state of constant struggle for a dignified and purposeful existence. It is a life that is lived in oscillating bouts of depression and nostalgic hope...

“When a South African refugee successfully reaches a reception point, it does not mean that he/she has escaped with his life. The nefariousness of the apartheid regime with its cross border raids and death squads quickly turns that sense of relief into one of phobic vigilance. Often, for his own security, the person has to transform his entire life into one of disguise, which in the process leads to a very serious psychological assault on his identity.”

These pressures have obviously exacted a severe toll on exile communities throughout the world.

It is time for us to assist them to return and to resettle in the country of their birth.

The church is being called upon to assist in this massive undertaking for the return and the re-integration of the exiles.

What is needed? How can we help?

1. **Reception Centres** will have to be established in all parts of the country. Churches who have land or buildings not in immediate use, could offer the temporary use of these facilities for the setting up of reception centres, where returnees can be received and welcomed. Some of the reception centres, which are near to entry points, will serve as short term centres, where returnees will stay for a short period of time, before being relocated nearer to their own communities.
2. **Personpower** will be needed to run the centres, to provide recreation, to cook meals and hold church services.

3. **Funds:** A great deal of money will be required to make the programme a success. Congregations can help by raising funds or making special collections for the project.
4. **Hospitals, clinics and medical equipment,** personnel and facilities will be urgently required.
5. **Schools and education:** There are thousands of scholars and students who will return and who will require education. As our schools are already overcrowded this will cause further problems. Churches, church schools and institutions and organisations that are involved with education need to think creatively of ways of resolving this issue.
6. **Clothing:** Many of the returnees will enter the country with very little clothing or with clothing unsuitable for our climate. Clothing will therefore be required at the reception centres.
7. **Employment and housing** are additional needs which will have to be met.

It is clear that this will be one of the most important projects ever undertaken in this country. It presents a challenge to the churches and we have a clear theological and moral obligation to become fully involved in the repatriation of our brothers and sisters.

It is a time for healing the wounds of battle, a time to rebuild broken lives, a time to reconcile the estranged, and it is time to engage in the construction of a new, free and prosperous society.

For further information kindly contact the SACC (011) 832-3540 or the SACBC (012) 21-1793
SACC/SACBC Returnees Task Force