

THE BISHOPS SPEAK: VOLUME IV

This volume of **The Bishops Speak** covers the two years 1986 and 1987, a time of intense political agitation and repression.

When 1986 began, the partial state of emergency imposed on 21 July 1985 was still in force. Despite the continuation of the violence and the mounting death toll averaging eighty a month, the state of emergency was lifted in March 1986.

At this time unrest became particularly intense in the Transvaal north of Pretoria, where the South African government was trying against the wishes of the inhabitants to force independence on the area known as KwaNdebele and to manipulate borders. The so-called government of KwaNdebele, set up by South Africa, created a force of vigilantes to crush the resistance.

At this time too a party of representatives from the British Commonwealth countries known as the Eminent Persons Group visited South Africa with a view to promoting the dismantling of apartheid and the holding of negotiations for a peaceful settlement. The project was aborted when South Africa launched attacks against what were alleged to be African National Congress centres in Zambia, Zimbabwe and Botswana. The event intensified the threat of heavier sanctions.

Throughout all the period of unrest, youth, in keeping with its established role in the liberation struggle, was not inactive. The school situation was constantly on the boil with great numbers of pupils missing out on their education in terms of the slogan "Liberation before Education". The students were reacting on the poor quality of education, the presence of troops in the townships, the banning of student organisations, the high-handed actions of the Department of Education and Training in regard to student representative councils, the transfer of teachers and the closing of schools without consultation.

Beneath the anti-school activity was the deep flaming resentment of the young people against apartheid. Parents and community leaders tried to take the situation in hand. They formed the Soweto Parents Crisis Committee, which later developed into the National Education Crisis Committee. Planning began for a more relevant curriculum of education entitled People's Education.

The situation grew more tense with the approach of 16 June 1986, the tenth anniversary of the Soweto uprising. The government decided that there was only one way to quell the unrest and imposed a general state of emergency on the whole country as from midnight on 11 June.

Hundreds of people were detained and a few deported. Detentions multiplied during the rest of the year to the extent that it was calculated that about 30 000 people were affected for longer or shorter periods. The leadership of 'progressive' organisations was profoundly affected, for instance all the members of the National Education Crisis Committee were detained. Church personnel did not escape the attention of the security forces. At one time or another the Catholic Church was represented among the detainees by twelve priests (including Father Smangaliso Mkhathshwa, Secretary

General of the Southern African Bishops' Conference), three deacons, four religious sisters, twenty seminarians and seven lay persons active in Church work. Bannings and restrictive orders were issued against persons and organisations.

Stricter control was imposed on the dissemination of news and views. The term 'subversive' was given very wide scope and information connected with unrest and security procedures could be released only with the authorisation of the Bureau for Information.

All reading material was banned in classrooms except that approved by the Department of education and Training. Parents and other persons were prohibited from entering any school without prior permission.

The United Democratic Front was declared an affected organisation. An investigation was launched into the finances of many organisations especially those of the extra-parliamentary opposition. Though some points were scored in the Courts of Law against the emergency regulations the government reacted by new legislation. When it re-imposed the state of emergency on 12 June 1987 it had effectively sealed off all legal loopholes.

Continuing to impose its will was obviously placing an enormous strain on the South African government. Meanwhile the pressure from outside also continued to grow, mainly in the form of economic measures. These had not reached the stage of seriously dislocating the economy but they were causing uneasiness and insecurity in the White population. The Whites were reacting in two ways. Some were leaving the country and no doubt many more would have done so had it been possible. But the great majority of those who remained saw their security in supporting the National Party and even more extreme right-wing Conservative and Herstigte Parties. This was clearly borne out in a White election on 6 May 1987.

Reforms that the National Party talked of were marginal, concerning marriage and morality and even group areas. The great pillars of apartheid remained untouched such as the Constitution ensuring White supremacy, the Land Act of 1913 amended in 1936 allocating 87 percent of the surface of the country to White ownership, discrimination in education, the homelands policy and the Population Registration Act. The move to establish a National Statutory Council for consultation with Black leadership offered little hope of significant change. In the meantime parliamentary rule slipped continually as increasing power was assumed by such organisations as the National Security Council and Joint Management Committees.

On the other hand after centuries of colonial rule and discrimination and decades of apartheid the African people had taken their destiny into their own hands. Fired by the vision and vigour of the ANC and galvanised by the youth revolt and the UDF they strained forward to the goal of a non-racial, unitary, democratic, one-person-one-vote South Africa of the future.

For the liberation movement this vision was not negotiable. For White South Africa, particularly the Afrikaner nation, White control was non-negotiable.

This was the impasse prevailing at the end of 1987.

The Pastoral letters, statements and press releases of the Southern African Catholic Bishops' Conference and of individual bishops reflect this turbulent time. There are references to police action, detentions, restrictions on press freedom, the Group Areas act, population removal, Namibia, attacks on *The New Nation*, to an interview with the State President, the school situation, conscientious objection, rent boycotts, the Kairos Document, liberation theology, commutation of death sentence and several other topics. Individuals affected by the emergency legislation are mentioned by name.

By the beginning of 1986 sanctions had become a burning issue. It was discussed at a plenary session of the Bishops' Conference in January 1986 and again at an extraordinary session in April of that year. The attitude of the Conference was reflected in a pastoral letter entitled **Economic Pressure for Justice**. The same extraordinary session published another pastoral under the title **Christian Hope in the Current Crisis**.

At the end of 1987 the Southern African hierarchy made an *ad limina* visit to Rome. The message addressed to Southern Africa by Pope John Paul II on this occasion is included in this volume. In the midst of the struggle between liberation and repression the papal message echoed and affirmed the note sounded by the 1986 pastoral letter of the Bishops' Conference on **Hope**.

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**SISTER BRIGID FLANAGAN, HF, ASSOCIATE SECRETARY GENERAL
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COMMENTS ON:**

"The state of emergency (which) cannot last indefinitely and when it is lifted or becomes inoperative it will be found not to have effected a cure. While apartheid remains in force the consequences will be with us". These lines were contained in an urgent message signed by 28 members of the Southern African Catholic Bishops' conference and sent to the State President in August 1986. The state of emergency is still with us. Indeed, it has lasted so long that it has almost become a way of life. All the evils resulting from apartheid still remain.

The detention net continues to be cast widely. Since June 1986 thousands of people, including many children, have been detained without trial and have suffered long periods of imprisonment, frequently in very uncomfortable and humiliating circumstances. Many have suffered psychological trauma as a result of solitary confinement. Those who have been released from detention, because of pressure brought to bear on the government, have been subjected to crippling restrictions. They have to be in their homes between certain hours, without regard to the detrimental effect this may have on their work. Cases are known of people being confined to their homes for 20 hours each day and of having to use the greater part of the remaining four hours travelling to and from the police station to report. In fact, restrictions are so

severe for some released detainees, that they have merely exchanged one prison for another.

Since the imposition of the state of emergency, civil liberties such as the **right of assembly** and the **right to information** have been suppressed. Meetings of every kind are banned or broken up by the police. Funeral services that are such sacred and important events in African culture have been stringently controlled. As a general rule only a limited number of relatives and close friends are allowed to attend. The funeral of Dr. David Webster was an exception. The thousands of people who attended his funeral behaved in a perfectly disciplined manner throughout, precisely because there was no harassment from the police.

Suppression of information and blocking of communication leads to all kinds of complications and inconveniences. As always happens when information is suppressed, rumours proliferate, engendering fear and suspicion all around. The **state of emergency** has been imposed in a misguided effort to stem the **tide of liberation**, which is irreversible. The government realises it is losing power and has made this desperate effort to maintain control of the situation. Unfortunately, imposing a state of emergency is not a solution; it merely adds to the problem. Once apartheid is eliminated and replaced by a new social fabric that guarantees the participation of every citizen on an equal footing in the development of a non-racial democratic South Africa, there will be no further need for the state of emergency.

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