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THE SYMBOL OF A DREAM

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South Africa's political prisoners.

by Hilda Bernstein

Dear Friends! Robben Island is about 1500 miles from Durban via Pretoria.

We were transported in military type prison trucks, handcuffed in twos and if this was not enough, also leg-chained.

For our long journey each of us got one loaf of dry brown bread. We had no drinking water. At the centre of the truck stood a black polythene bucket, which served as a toilet.

Friends! At the end of a 1500-mile journey I am not taxing your imaginations, to think what the truck looked like!

On arrival at Cape Town, we were off loaded under heavy police guard with dogs. We were immediately loaded into the wooden hold of a ferry boat; even at sea we remained chained together like wild animals transported to a zoo.

Furthermore most of us, never having been at sea before, were violently sea-sick. But there was not a single murmur of regret at the state in which we found ourselves. Looking round at each man's face I could see defiance, pride, determination - which up to today is still undaunted, the pride of a down-trodden people. We landed on Robben Island at about 1.30 p.m.

Dear Friends and comrades! It was there that I met and share the suffering of men who are the symbols of a dream, the dream of the oppressed masses of South Africa, of a free and multi-racial country. Nelson Mandela, Govan Mbeki, Walter Sisulu and others. I bring you their greetings!

The speaker: Albert Dlomo, who had arrived in England on an exit permit after spending four years in the hell of Robben Island, South Africa's top security prison for political prisoners. Dlomo's crime? He had been charged with membership of the African National Congress of South Africa, formed in 1912, made illegal in 1961.

The occasion: a conference of major importance held in London to consider a campaign for the release of political prisoners in Southern Africa.

Albert Dlomo went on to describe the conditions on Robben Island, where men work at digging and crushing stone in a quarry. The stone which must be finely crushed is not used for any purpose but dumped away. Men in isolation work at a lime quarry, 'an eye-blinding white lime', said Dlomo, 'its use God alone knows.'

South Africa is an imprisoned society in the literal sense that a large proportion of its citizens have been or will be in prison at some stage of their lives. On average, there is a prosecution under the pass laws every minute of every day and night in South Africa - there are about 2,000 pass law arrests every single day. For every 100,000 of their population, the Netherlands has 25 prisoners; the United Kingdom 72; South Africa 417.

These are not people convicted of political crimes, though it is increasingly difficult to know what is a political crime in South Africa. They have been found guilty under apartheid laws - laws that find no parallel anywhere in the world, laws that affect only Africans. Like being out in the streets after curfew hour, being in the wrong labour area, being in the town without a special permit, not being ~~banned~~ to produce the right tax receipt on demand, being unemployed, or for leaving employment without permission.

The world's busiest hangman operates in South Africa. In Pretoria Central Prison, the hanging prison, there is a special gallows with a number of nooses, which is used for multiple hangings. Out of the world's judicial executions, 47 per cent take place in South Africa.

Still, there is a difference between all these imprisoned because of the breach of oppressive, political laws, and those imprisoned as the result of a conscious political action against

the apartheid state. For these political prisoners, South Africa gives us no statistics.

The political trial - in any country - is intended not merely as the judicial process applied to those who oppose the state; but, more importantly, it is intended as a public demonstration of the power of the state and the ineffectiveness of its enemies.

In the same way, the political prisoner is not simply an individual who is suffering punishment for his defiance of the laws or conditions of a particular country; he is also intended to be a warning, an object lesson, to all others who think as he thinks, a deterrent to others who might be tempted to act as he acted.

South Africa, like other police states, likes to declare that it has no political prisoners, only convicted criminals who have broken the laws of the land. Yet no attempt is made to explain why one group of prisoners - those convicted of what we would call political crimes - are separated from all others and treated with a harshness and deprivation greater than that of other prisoners.

For political prisoners there is not, nor can there be, any remission of sentence, any amnesty, any parole. This means, for example, that a man given a life sentence never leaves prison until he dies. 'Life' means just that in x South Africa x - prison for the rest of your life.

Political prisoners are not permitted to receive any news, may not have any radios or newspapers, or any magazines with articles about what is happening either in South Africa or anywhere in the world. It is almost impossible for people to appreciate the awfulness of this order. No item of news of any kind, other than that of a strictly personal and family nature, may reach a political prisoner, whose few letters are often so censored that they are cut to ribbons and the conversations of whose visitors are carefully monitored. In addition to the gross

hardships of prison life, these men and women are forced to exist in a kind of vacuum where not only are they physically debarred from the world outside the prison walls, but mentally barred as well. For them, there must be nothing outside the prison, either in South Africa itself or the rest of Africa, or even any country of the world. Think for a moment of some of the major events of the past ten years: the war in Nigeria, the May events of France of 1968, the cultural revolution in China, the assassination of Martin Luther King, the changes in the Middle East, the coups, colonels in Greece, Allende in Chile and the right-wing coup against him, Watergate, *Portugal, Spain* there is no end to such a list. But think about it. For these events are not simply 'news' to appear in the press; they are the foundations on which we build our knowledge and understanding of the world. Freeze your world at the year 1961, or 1964 (when the first big batch of political prisoners received long sentences, many of them life) or 1967 or 68, or whatever year it was that the sentence began. The world stops. It is not simply a long sleep for the political prisoner, it is a never-ending nightmare. Of all people in our society, it is those who have been in the forefront of political events who need most deeply some contact with the realities of our world. From these - not from prisoners convicted of fraud, rape, murder or theft - it is permanently barred.

And what purpose is served by this mental mutilation of the political prisoners, this type of living death? Nothing, none whatsoever, save that of the harshest, most punitive punishment piled on the prison sentence itself and the other punishments that are reserved for political prisoners.

Apartheid controls every aspect of life in South Africa, from birth to death, and there is apartheid as well in the prisons. Whites and blacks are kept in different prisons, and receive different treatment and diets. White men are kept at Pretoria Local, where they are kept apart from other prisoners. Black men are kept on the penal Robben Island, off the shores of the

Cape; other black prisoners are taken to Robben Island, but the political prisoners are kept separate from these. Women, black and white, are housed in two prisons in a distant and hot small town in the Transvaal, Barberton. There are no longer any white women political prisoners; they have served their sentences and been released.

Ordinary privileges granted to other prisoners are withheld from political prisoners, who are kept for years in the lowest categories, with severe restrictions on the letters they may write and receive, and the visits they may have from relatives. Worst of all are the prisoners from Namibia (South West Africa) who are taken to Robben Island, thousands of miles from their own land, and who as a result never receive visits (their families are far too poor to raise the fare money to travel so far) nor hear from their families and home.

The use of prison libraries and the granting of facilities for study are used as weapons against political prisoners, a means of ~~psych~~ psychological torture. The rules governing study in prisons are arbitrary, and the right to continue with this life-saving 'privilege' - a necessity, especially for long-term prisoners and those doing life - may be withdrawn at the whim of a spiteful prison officer; books for study are refused, many subjects entirely barred. (For example, science is forbidden, all foreign languages except German barred, post-graduate study prohibited.)

Political prisoners, also, receive no remuneration for work.

When those who are not in for life have finally served their sentence and been released, they are immediately served with orders banning them from all gatherings and many places and severely restricting their movements; and in the case of Africans they are often expelled totally from the town where they used to live, and sent to resettlement camps in remote and distant parts of the country, where there is no possibility of

employment and where life can only be lived at the most primitive and withering level.

There is sadism in the treatment of South Africa's political prisoners, and often an almost wilful spite, but underlying the methods is careful calculation.

The political prisoner is not, in a real sense, a victim, either of bad laws and general oppression, nor of chance bad luck, he is not a man or woman to whom things have simply happened; he or she is the instigator of change, the activist, the conscious and thinking individual who found courage and purpose and strength to fight the obscenity of white minority rule in South Africa. Outside jail this person was a leader, someone who laid a hand on the wheel of history; inside he or she remains a symbol, and even today, ten years after their arrest and trial, Africans talk of Mandela and Mbeki and Sisulu on Robben Island as their leaders.

Therefore the treatment of political prisoners is designed to humiliate and grind down and break the will of those inside; and to intimidate all independent political thinking or action from others outside. Just as the concentration camp in Nazi Germany was the institution designed to subdue not only the inmates but the whole nation, so is the treatment of our men and women in South African jails planned deliberately as a warning to the people as a whole, to know what awaits them ~~if~~ if they attempt to protest or to resist apartheid.

The political prisoner refuses to play the role of the victim never concedes defeat. The battle changes after the trial and the sentence. The fight must continue, even under the terrible hardships and difficulties of prison life, the fight against intimidation, for the right to retain some dignity, against the discrimination which pursues a South African wherever he goes, against the humiliations, the beatings and foulness of the warders. Over and over the news trickles out to us from inside the prisons - so-and-so has been put on spare diet, solitary

confinement, for protesting against the brutality of warders, for demanding medical aid for a comrade, for insisting on the right to see the Prison Regulations, for petitioning the Commander about the lack of food . . . the prisoners who have been released tell heart-breaking stories of life on Robben Island or Barberton or Pretoria, but ~~XXXXXXXXXXXX~~ each one brings the same message: but their morale is high, very high!

Strangely enough this ugly, oppressive, greedy and powerful government is susceptible to pressure, from within the country and from outside. A white political prisoner, Harold Strachan, boldly exposed jail conditions when he was released; as a result, he was sent back to jail to serve another sentence; but at the same time, many of the worst conditions of which he had complained were improved. World-wide attention on political trials has saved the lives of some political leaders, helped mitigate the sentences on others. Last year, black political prisoners on Robben Island presented a petition to the Commanding Officer. Their complaints included: harassment and assaults by certain warders; denial of library, recreational and study facilities; insufficient and unpalatable foods; dangerously casual and unhygienic medical attention; and that they were given contradictory instructions and governed by caprice, and not informed of their rights. At least one prisoner connected with the petition was punished with six months solitary confinement. But lawyers helped to bring a court action arising out of this punishment, and a Cape Town judge ruled the punishment was illegal; but he also ruled that access to library and recreational facilities, and permission to pursue courses of study, were not prisoners' by right - the prison authority had the power to grant or withdraw such things.

There are two white and about thirty-seven Africans serving life sentences. Some names are world-famous, like Nelson Mandela, the black lawyer who abandoned his work and his home to lead resistance from underground; Govan Mbeki, scholar and peasant leader, a gentle, humane teacher with a will of steel; Ahmed Kathrada, an Indian South African, who dedicated his young life

to the liberation struggle; and Bram Fischer, the barrister from an impeccable Afrikaner background who joined the Communist Party and associated himself wholly with the black struggle for human rights.

These, and the other political prisoners, challenged the apartheid state, first, in the 1950's, by strikes, demonstrations and peaceful protests; and then, in the 1960's, when all avenues of protest were closed, when the African National Congress and the Pan African Congress and other organisations were declared illegal, when newspapers were banned and activities prohibited, resistance took the form of planned acts of sabotage against government buildings and institutions, under the direction of Umkhonto We Sizwe (the Spear of the Nation), which was the new military wing of the banned African National Congress.

The government answered the formation of Umkhonto We Sizwe with the Sabotage Act of 1963. It created retrospective offences for which people could receive the death penalty. It provided for the indefinite detention of political prisoners without charge or trial, and defined sabotage as almost any action taken to further economic or political change.

From the 1960's, however, young men had been making their way out of the country to enlist for military training with the African National Congress. In August of 1967 advance units of Umkonto We Sizwe, together with fighters of the Zimbabwe African Peoples' Union (from Rhodesia) opened a new chapter of resistance in Southern Africa, when they engaged Rhodesian security forces in fierce fighting. Since then there has been steady infiltration into Rhodesia, and armed clashes on the frontiers of Rhodesia and Namibia (South West Africa.)

Controlling the most formidable armed forces in all Africa, with every type of modern weapon, South Africa is protected by its position at the southern tip of the African continent, with the Atlantic Ocean on one side and the Indian Ocean on the

to protect its shores. To the north, South Africa has common frontiers with Namibia (South West Africa) which it has illegally annexed, with Botswana, a country with an independent African government, but the position of which makes it beholden to its mighty neighbour; Rhodesia, ruled by a white minority government; and Mozambique, controlled by the Portuguese. In Namibia and Rhodesia armed struggle is sporadic but increasing; in Mozambique it is already well advanced after several years, and the Mozambique freedom forces, FRELIMO, control huge areas within the country.

It is a long way to South Africa from almost anywhere. It is thousands of miles from Europe, and vast distances and difficult ~~country~~ <sup>terrain</sup> separate it from free countries in Africa. Its strongest allies are the countries of Europe who thrive on mutual trade with its rich white economy - England, France, the United States, West Germany, Japan. These countries deplore apartheid while giving it every material support and drawing huge profits from its exploitation of the black people. They also deplore the rising military struggle which ultimately will rob them of their rich interests and imperil their investments.

But it is too late for them. South Africa is an embattled society. It has been designed and built over the past half century as a comprehensive, rigid and permanent system of racial domination and discrimination, underpinned by the exploitation of cheap black labour. From land distribution to labour laws, from migratory labour to compulsory segregation, from one instrument of authority to any other - banishments, bannings, house arrest, the police, the courts, the army - from the laws to that ultimate symbol and instrument of dictatorship, the prisons, the apartheid society is interlinked in all aspects.

This very fact gives to any element of popular resistance to apartheid a potentially revolutionary nature and imparts to the liberation movement a revolutionary character. Only Amandla ~~Ngwethu~~ Ngwethu! - power to the people - can satisfy the basic aspirations of the black majority.

The men and women who have been, and who are today, imprisoned in South Africa for their part in the struggle to overthrow the apartheid system stand not only as symbols of their people's struggle, but also ask tokens of its future, when the bars have been torn down and the people claim what is theirs. It is because the political prisoners represent ~~xxxx~~ both the best of the past and the best of the future that the campaign for their release is a vital part of the struggle for the emancipation of their people.

They are, they will always be, 'the symbols of a dream, ~~of~~ the dream of the oppressed masses of South Africa, of a free and multi-racial country.' To those who sent us greetings from the darkness of their prison cells, let us reply with voices so strong that they will resound down Africa, to Robben Island, our voices joined to help free our political -risoners.

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