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Voluntary Service

VIOLENCE/NVIO

Ad Hoc Committee on
VOLUNTARY AND ALTERNATIVE SERVICE

Progress Report, August 1979

Conscientious Objection

There are three kinds of conscientious objectors:

- a nonconscriptivists who are opposed to all forms of conscripted national or government service (eg Jehovah's Witnesses).
- b nonmilitarists who are opposed to all kinds of service controlled by the Department of Defence but are prepared to do nonmilitary forms of national service in other government departments.
- c noncombatants who are prepared to do their national service in the Defence Force provided they are exempted from having to carry a gun and from having to learn how to use it.

At present the Department of Defence interprets section 67(3) of the Defence Act more broadly than the letter of the law allows and applicants with bona fide religious conditions are seldom refused non-combatant recognition. Provision is also made to accommodate non-militarists on an individual basis. There is, however, at present no provision for nonconscriptivists other than three years in detention barracks.

Voluntary and alternative service

A Voluntary Service Corps has been organised composed of men and women, black and white, who are willing to devote upto three years to national service as ambulance drivers, community health educators, hospital attendants, or work in other essential fields. It is our hope

that this form of national service will be recognised as an alternative to military service for all three kinds of conscientious objectors. We have established a unit of the Voluntary Service Corps in Cape Town. A second unit will be operational in Rundu, South West Africa/Namibia by November 1979 and a third unit is in the planning stage in Durban. These units will provide models for future units in other areas.

In 1974 a first proposal for a special service corps for non-military service was made to the Department of Defence through Brigadier Cyrus Smith. Brigadier Smith advised that it was not feasible for the Department of Defence to initiate such a corps, but that if some non-governmental organisations were to establish a corps there was the possibility that it might be accepted as an alternative form of service.

In 1977 an Ad Hoc Committee on Voluntary and Alternative Service was formed with participation open to representatives of churches and other organisations concerned. At present Quakers and Unitarians, amongst others, have designated representatives or observers for the planning committee.

In January 1979 a proposal was submitted to the Department of Defence in Pretoria that conscientious objectors be allowed to serve in a Voluntary Service Corps as an alternative to national service in the military. The proposal specified conditions of service for the volunteers which were similar to those of military service. The actual details remain to be negotiated with the Department of Defence. We described the proposed ambulance unit at Rundu as an example of the type of service to be provided by the Voluntary Service Corps. Once the units at Cape Town and Rundu have been in operation long enough to establish a pattern of service we will again approach the Department of Defence to seek their approval for this form of alternative service.

The Cape Town Unit

The Cape Town Unit of the Voluntary Service Corps began operation on 13 August 1979. The Unit has its office at the Day Hospital in Elsies River. The work of the unit in Elsies River is coordinated with other social services through the Coordinating Committee of Operation Hand-Up, an association of social and health workers to promote self-help projects in the area. Unit volunteers are involved in three types of community activity: ambulance driving, health education, and related community development projects. At present the unit operates two ambulances, primarily for transportation to and from the Day Hospital and other hospitals in the area for adults or children who are not acutely ill and thus not entitled to transportation in the provincial (CPLA) ambulances or in the taxi service provided by the Day Hospital. The nursing Sister-in-charge at the Day Hospital clinics refers patients to the Voluntary Service Ambulance.

Two of the volunteers are men who live in Elsies River. They serve full time. Both help as volunteers with the work of the Day Hospital when they are not involved driving an ambulance in other community projects. Another ten volunteers are students at the University of Cape Town who work part time for one or two sessions a week, driving an ambulance, in health education, or a community project. These men and women are giving their service as an indication of a type of voluntary service which they would be willing to perform as an alternative to national service in military units.

As the work of the Cape Town unit expands it will provide ambulance service for other areas as well. At present children who have had cerebral palsey are transported for physiotherapy twice a week from Crossroads and Guguletu to Red Cross Hospital.

The funds for the operation of the unit come mainly from religious groups and individuals who support the proposal that alternatives to military service should be provided for conscientious objectors. However small donations are also received from those persons using the ambulance service who can afford to pay the equivalent of a bus or taxi fare. The service is free for those who cannot afford to contribute. The unit's two vehicles (Toyota Hiace vans) are marked "Voluntary Service - Ambulance" in English, Afrikaans, and Xhosa. St John Ambulance will provide additional vehicles as they are needed and as we receive funds to expand the service.

A full time volunteer receives R135 a month, a sum intended to cover food and housing with approximately R35 left for personal expenses. Accident, health, and life insurance (R10 000) are provided for each volunteer. White coats and a hat are provided for those who drive the ambulances. The budget for the first six months of operation is R5 310. This sum has already been received; however an equal amount is needed to allow the unit to operate for an initial period of one year. Donations for the work are received by the Voluntary Service Committee of the Religious Society of Friends, Quaker House, Rye Road, 7700 Mowbray.

Training for the volunteers in First Aid and Community Health is provided by the St John Ambulance, orientation to the community and its problems by members of the Coordinating Committee of Operation Hand-Up, and a background of the aims of voluntary service by the Voluntary Service Committee of the Religious Society of Friends. The work of the unit will be evaluated at least every three months.

The initial purpose of the Cape Town Unit in Elsie's River is to help the Coordinating Committee of Operation Hand-Up realise some of its goals for self-help projects in the health area. Thus the volunteers will only

serve on an interim basis. It is part of the task of the volunteers to train community members to take over their work. We hope that the volunteers will be able to withdraw by the end of one year, or sooner if possible, and turn over the work to residents of the community. Volunteers would then move on to new projects.

The Rundu Unit

We would like to establish an ambulance unit in the Kavango Territory of South West Africa/Namibia to serve the Kavango people. The ambulance would transport patients to and from the villages and the Mission and State Hospitals and clinics in the area. Where appropriate volunteers would be expected to assist the staffs of the hospitals and clinics according to their special skills or training and to assist in public health projects. We have funds in hand to support two vehicles and four volunteers for a period of one year. The vehicles, one Landrover and one Toyota Hiace personnel carrier, have already been purchased. For the initial period we expect to select two volunteers from the Kavango Territory and two men from elsewhere who are conscientious objectors. The details of our cooperation with the various agencies in the area remain to be negotiated.

The Durban Unit

In August 1979 an ad hoc group in Durban began a series of meetings to consider possibilities for establishing a unit of Voluntary Service in the Durban area. The group is composed of members of churches and service organisations in Durban as well as men who are conscientious objectors.

As additional units are formed the work will be coordinated through a national committee for voluntary service.

On behalf of the Ad Hoc Committee:

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