

GIVE OUR SONS A CHOICE

A7.10.5

Mothers from Cape Town, Durban and Johannesburg have put their names to a statement urging the institution of "constructive non-punitive alternatives to obligatory military service".

The women have acted in the belief that it is time that the adult generation assumes responsibility for seeking constructive options for those who have moral objections to serving in the South African Defence Force.

This public declaration by these mothers, released to the Press on Tuesday 7 February 1989, is in part a troubled response to the heavy jail terms meted out to objectors Ivan Thoms, David Bruce and Charles Bester. It comes in the wake of last year's declaration by 143 conscripts that they would face jail rather than perform military service.

These events publically signalled the weight of the decisions taken by young men - some still in their teens - and of the complete absence of creative options for those who refuse to serve in the SADF because they regard apartheid as indefensible. Many mothers had long experienced this dilemma as a private threat to the unity and integrity of their families. And it is such women who have put their names to the statement.

They are women from all walks of life - working women and housewives; people from the world of business as well as professional women. The greatest number 371 come from the areas in and around Johannesburg, copies of these signatures are enclosed. Some of the signatories presently have sons in the army; others have sons who have completed their service; and others have children who face the call-up in years to come.

They speak out in confidence that many other mothers share their concern that :

There should be forms of national service which enable young men to fulfil the values that they have learned in their homes, rather than deny these principles.

There should be service options which defuse racial polarisation and make meaningful contribution towards building a common, non-racial society.

There should be options which will ensure that young people will contribute their talents wholeheartedly for the communal good, rather than abandon the country in which they were reared.

There should be options so that families are not torn apart by exile or the spectre of jail.

The statement to which hundreds of women have put their names in recent weeks is not a petition. It will not be sent as an appeal to anyone in authority or to particular opponents of the apartheid system.

It is intended as a signal to our youth that we have not abandoned to them the entire question of war and peace in South Africa. And it is an appeal to women : The demand for a change in the law is a legitimate course of action. It can only be won by responsible and united action by those truly concerned. The signatories believe mothers have the capacity for such action and that their statement is just the first step in a process.

Women who are anxious to talk about "giving our sons a choice" are invited to do so on Wednesday March 8 - International Womens Day. A gathering will be organised in Johannesburg. Details will appear in the press.

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For mothers around the country the bi-annual call up once again highlights the moral dilemma of young men drafted into the SADF

Many young men wish to serve their country but question the role of the SADF. They ask whether the SADF presence in the townships and beyond our borders is defending the country they love or the system of apartheid, which they find indefensible. For others, the whole concept of bearing arms is abhorrent. We share their anguish and stand in support of them. We call for constructive, non-punitive alternatives to obligatory military service..

We are deeply aware of the traumatic effect military service has on young men. For many of whom there is little real option but to serve in the SADF. The appalling choices are a six year prison sentence, voluntary exile or the twilight world of avoidance. If they are religious pacifists they face a punishing six years of so-called community service, often in meaningless jobs not necessarily utilising their skills. We support them all whatever their decision.

Instead of our young men being embroiled in moral conflict, civil strife, fear and violence we want them to have the choice of serving in other ways. Without this choice South Africa loses their skills and contribution to a free, open and peaceful future for all.

We cannot afford this loss.

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