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# Statement by the SA Catholic Bishops Conference explaining its call for an end to conscription

Our concern as Bishops in Southern Africa is for a speedy and just solution to the problems experienced by the people of RSA and Namibia, a solution in which all sectors of the population are called to play their part.

## The situation

In our report on Namibia, issued in 1982, we drew your attention to the fact that the majority of Namibians regard the SADF as an army of occupation which is hindering the granting of independence to that country in terms of Resolution 435 of the UN Security Council.

During the unrest in the Vaal and East Rand townships in late 1984 the army was deployed in a support capacity to the SAP operating in those areas. This action was greeted with shock and horror by the inhabitants of those townships and by other South Africans concerned about how and where the army is deployed.

This use of the army to enforce "law and order" within the country has been further extended in 1985 to include the townships in the Eastern Cape, despite all the protests that the legitimate use of an army is in the defence of the country against

its enemies.

Many young men who are conscripted each year into the SADF are experiencing crises of conscience as they become aware of the role that they are being expected to play in the black townships, and elsewhere in RSA. As far back as 1977 in our statement "On Conscientious Objection" which we issued in our concern for the nature of the armed struggle and the escalating violence in Southern Africa, we defended the right of every individual to follow his own conscience; the right therefore to conscientious objection both on the grounds of universal pacificism and on the grounds that a person may seriously believe the war to be unjust.

We believe that a serious decision of this nature is a moral judgement and must be made after deep and prayerful examination of the facts available. In 1977 we urged the RSA government to make provision for alternative forms of non-military national service, as is found in other parts of the world. Sixty six countries do not have conscription. In 1983, in a letter to the Minister of Defence about the proposed Defence Amendment Act, Cardinal McCann, on our behalf, pointed out to the minister that the proposed

amendments, making it possible for Christian pacifists to refuse military training, did not go far enough. Provision should also be made for so-called moral or ethical objectors. At that time we stated that if such an amendment was not included in the Defence Amendment Act we would find it necessary to reject the Act as unjust.

## Our suggestion

Our suggested amendment was not included in the Defence Amendment Act. The situation in Southern Africa has continued to deteriorate and in 1985 we find ourselves in a situation of grave crisis.

We are concerned at the growing numbers of young men faced with a crisis of conscience caused by their conscription. The choices for them are:

- Serving in an army with whose mode of operation they cannot agree.
- Doing 6 years alternate service if they are recognised as religious pacifists.
- Serving a 6 year jail sentence if they object to the war on the grounds that they believe it to be unjust.

- Leaving the country and living in exile.

They are faced with these choices because of the system of compulsory conscription in RSA which does not prevail in most other countries around the world.

We recognise that an end to conscription would leave membership of the SADF open to those who are in sympathy with it and would grant individuals freedom of conscience in determining their response to the situation. Therefore we join our voices with those who have already asked for an end to conscription. We call on the Government to amend the Defence Act to make this possible. We also encourage Catholics to help promote peace by working for an end to conscription in whatever ways lie open to them.



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**END CONSCRIPTION CAMPAIGN (ECC)**

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