

United Nations

Press Release

Department of Public Information • Press Section • New York

Note No. 4636
29 September 1987

NOTE TO CORRESPONDENTS

CAMPAIGN TO 'UNLOCK APARTHEID'S JAILS' AND FREE POLITICAL PRISONERS LAUNCHED AT HEADQUARTERS BY ANTI-APARTHEID COMMITTEE AND UNITED STATES MAYORS

At a meeting yesterday at Headquarters, the Special Committee against Apartheid and the United States Conference of Mayors, in association with the American Committee on Africa and the Africa Fund, two non-governmental organizations, launched a campaign entitled, "Unlock Apartheid's Jails", aimed at freeing political prisoners in South Africa.

In addition to a greeting by Secretary-General Javier Perez de Cuellar to the six mayors present, statements were made by the Chairman of the Special Committee, Joseph N. Garba (Nigeria), the Chairman of the United States Conference of Mayors, Richard Berkley, mayor of Kansas City, and Marion Barry, mayor of Washington, D.C.

The other mayors present were Raymond Flynn, of Boston; Arthur Holland, of Trenton; Thurman Milner, of Hartford; and Joseph Paolino Jr., of Providence.

Welcoming the mayors to the United Nations, the Secretary-General thanked them for their initiative to secure the freedom of political prisoners in South Africa -- one which could undoubtedly strengthen the efforts of the international community to achieve that objective. The campaign would help to focus public attention on the serious situation prevailing in South Africa.

Certainly, the release of political prisoners could lead to meaningful negotiations and a peaceful end to the tragedy and turmoil in South Africa, the Secretary-General said. The efforts of the mayors were part of the larger struggle to dismantle apartheid and to put in place a democratic system that guaranteed human rights for all the people of South Africa in a manner consistent with the basic principles of the Charter.

The Chairman of the Special Committee, Mr. Garba (Nigeria), said that as resistance by the overwhelming majority of the people of South Africa had intensified, oppression had grown to unconscionable levels. Mistreatment, torture and use of vigilantes -- a new and insidious semi-official method of assassination and intimidation -- had become rampant.

Children had been chosen as special targets of State violence, with 40 per cent out of the 30,000 people held in detention since last year being under 18 and many as young as 12 years of age. Twenty-six persons had died in detention in the last three years, and one woman and 29 young men were on death row. The only crime of those people was their opposition to apartheid.

It was only natural, therefore, that the elected officials of great cities in the United States were raising their voices and had decided to launch the campaign to unlock apartheid jails, the Chairman said. At a time of strict press censorship in South Africa, when a curtain of silence had fallen around that tormented country, there was an urgent task to make known to the world the continuing suffering of the people of that country and the fact that their spirit remained indomitable. He added: "We must make the apartheid regime understand that the last chance for a peaceful settlement in South Africa requires an end of repression and the immediate release of prisoners so that peaceful negotiations with the genuine and authentic leaders of the black majority can be held."

The Chairman of the United States Conference of Mayors, Kansas City mayor Mr. Berkley, said the mayors of many United States cities considered the apartheid policy practiced by South Africa to be morally reprehensible and inconsistent with the humanitarian and democratic principles to which their country was so firmly committed. They had therefore adopted anti-apartheid and disinvestment resolutions -- actions which would impact the apartheid system.

He said the United States, which experienced the highest level of freedom of thought, movement and action, had an extra obligation to help others who through no fault of their own were the victims of an unacceptable policy. What was happening in South Africa was illogical, intolerable, inhumane and unacceptable. He urged those who were so fortunate to have freedom to join in the effort to unlock the jails of South Africa.

The mayor of Washington, D.C., Mr. Barry, said his city had prohibited investment in South Africa to show its displeasure with apartheid. It was also in his city that thousands had been jailed for demonstrating in front of the South African Embassy.

In a concluding statement, the Chairman of the Special Committee said the Committee's main problem was a lack of information coming out of South Africa. Because there was no longer news on television, America was once again "going to sleep". For that reason, symbolic acts such as the present campaign were very important. The time for words was gone; it was now time for action. He called on all to embrace the struggle against apartheid. The actions of people would solve the South African problem, and the people, led by their elected representatives, would make a change.

As part of the launching ceremony, the mayors later presented the keys of their cities to symbolize the hundreds of keys collected in places of worship throughout the United States, as well as petitions, to be forwarded to the South African Government to release political prisoners. The keys will be delivered outside the South African Consulate in New York on 13 October, and at the South African Embassy in Washington, D.C., on Human Rights Day, 10 December.