Death in Detention in South Africa

by: Paul Irish

a slip on a stair
a flight through the air
these are the ways
they say we take
now, they find you a hanging
a hanging in your cell
another one who went that way
that's what they say
but we know better
as even your little ones do
you took the way
of the first black martyr
when he refused the yoke
and took death instead
you will be added to the
string of beads we wear
and proudly display when
we sing of the way

a black martyr goes
leading to the time when
we will weave freedom ribbons
in our hair*

Black poet James Matthews wrote this poem a short while ago for his fellow South Africans who have died in detention. The official reasons given for their deaths by the security police are a mockery of the truth. I. Haron "fell down stairs"; N. Kgosthe "slipped in shower"; A. Timol "suicide" by jumping through the 10th floor window of the police interrogation center. Most recently the deaths of Soweto student J. Meghabe and trade unionist L. Mazwembe, held in the wake of the mass uprisings this summer, were termed "suicide by hanging."

Now James Matthews himself is being held by the South African security police. A letter from South Africa has reached this country expressing the fear that unless international cries of protest, Matthews may be the next name listed in the annals of the security police as a "suicide by hanging."

Matthews is one of thousands at present held under South Africa's draconian security legislation. The laws allow detainees to be kept incommunicado indefinitely, without explanation, without being charged, without access to a lawyer, to family, priest or doctor. The South African security police literally have the power to make a person disappear, sometimes forever.

James Matthews is being held by the white authorities in South Africa because, in the simple language of poetry, he dared express the deep feelings of his people -- the anger, and the demand for justice.

soweto skies are aflame with anger
wind carrying the wails of the slain
fire ignited in the minds of people
burst forth in other places
fuelled by layers of oppression
piled around them like kindling
added to the conflagration
nestled in the soul of soweto
words like petrol drops spewed
turn into burning brands passed on
has burst forth in volcanic fury
consuming all in its heat
soweto now becomes a brazier
furnishing warmth to those who demand
their birthright as fathers and mothers
sons and daughters of the soil
making their demand as urgent
as lava brought to the boil

The South African government has resorted to naked brutality in its attempt to suppress the freedom struggle. Hundreds, many young school children, have died under a hail of police bullets this past summer. Others are dying under torture in its jails. Yet the South African government is still sensitive to outside opinion because it fears the results of isolation. Thus the Tony award-winning actors Winston Ntshona and John Kani were swiftly released after it became apparent that thousands of actors in this country would demonstrate protesting their detention on October 26, and mar the "independence" ceremony for the Transkei.

The black people of South Africa are not waiting for our goodwill to come and free them. Steeled by the realities of their oppression; they are organizing for the battles they will have to fight to win their birthright. In the words of James Matthews,

we do not have dreams
dreams are like flowers
we cannot afford
whose petals will wither
and fall
as would dreams die
if we are foolish enough to cherish dreams

the reality we know
has no time for flowers
or dreams
cacti claws clutching flesh
blossoms of our nightmares
the weight of chains heavy
on backs
dispell dreams for reality's stead
to lay in flowered fields
dream-dazed illusionist
unmindful of corrupted laws
is not a state we share
reality demands rid ourselves of all chains
then, perhaps, we shall indulge in flower-filled dreams
We cannot fight the battles, but we can give some protection and support to those who are engaged in the struggle.

* Poems taken from "Tribute to Martyrs" published in South Africa by the Black Literature & Arts Congress, Vol. 1 No. 3.

(Paul Irish is executive associate of the American Committee on Africa and the Africa Fund. The Fund (305 East 46th Street, New York, N.Y. 10017) seeks contributions for the legal defense of political prisoners in South Africa. Readers concerned about Mr. Matthews may write to him % Police Headquarters, Calendon Square, Cape Town, South Africa.)

The Africa Fund
305 East 46th Street
New York, N.Y. 10017
(212) 838-5030