HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSION

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DETAINEES' HUNGER STRIKE AT DIEPKLOOF PRISON

Detainees at Diepkloof Prison have announced that they have decided to go on hunger strike yet again to draw the authorities' and the public’s attention to their demands. This should make every thinking South African sit up and listen to the desperate plea being made by those who the Government has chosen to remove from society. The HRC is very concerned about the plight of long-term detainees. Embarking on the extreme sacrifice of starving oneself in order to appeal to others to do something about one’s plight, conveys the desperation of the situation facing hundreds of long-term detainees in South Africa.

Many of these detainees are approaching one thousand days in detention with no end in sight. They have sent numerous memoranda and letters to the Ministers of Law and Order and Justice and even to the State President, setting out their grievances and stating why they believe their detention to be fundamentally unjust. Many of them have appealed to the courts to declare their detentions illegal. All these attempts have ended up in the same dead end. On the other hand, numerous detainees have been released when sufficient public pressure has been exerted. Well known examples of this have been the release of many child detainees due to public pressure, the "release" of the UDF Kine 3, the release of certain high-profile detainees such as Ngwakhe Sisulu, and the release of a number of detainees who have embarked on hunger strikes.

This has led detainees to the conclusion that the only way they can get out of prison, short of breaking out, is to resort to the one protest weapon they have: denying themselves food, sometimes for lengthy periods, even if this means jeopardising their health and causing their hospitalisation. As a result there have been numerous hunger strikes. According to HRC records, since the beginning of the national State of Emergency in 1986, there have been 37 hunger strikes, involving many hundreds of detainees in prisons around the country. This figure excludes hunger strikes by detainees which have never reached the public eye, particularly in small areas.
The HRC is deeply concerned about:

* the long-term damage which is being caused to detainees' physical and psychological health;
* the apparently arbitrary and indefinite character of emergency detention. The government's attitude seems to be that detainees can simply rot in prison;
* the plight of child detainees, who are being denied a normal life, education, and upbringing;
* the plight of families of detainees who have been left without breadwinners, parents and loved ones.

In the light of the above, the HRC supports the action of the Diepkloof detainees and calls for the immediate and unconditional release of all emergency detainees. Failing this, we suggest the following:

1) that families, independent doctors, and lawyers have free access to the detainees;

2) that families and the community at large have proper access to information regarding the plight of detainees, their conditions and their grievances. It is totally unacceptable for the Prisons Department to trot out their standard-form statements attempting to discredit and undermine the detainees' protest. They have a duty to the public to reveal the true situation in our prisons.

3) that an independent Commission of Inquiry consisting of top jurists and doctors investigate the circumstances under which long-term detainees are being held.