



A SPECIAL MESSAGE FROM EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR EMERITUS
GEORGE M. HOUSER

November 11, 1994

Dear Friend of ACOA,

A few weeks ago I returned from a visit to the new South Africa. It was an emotional experience. Like so many others who were involved with liberation there, I never expected to see the day when apartheid would no longer be the law of the land.

I first visited South Africa in 1954, just 40 years ago, when it was firmly in the grip of the National Party, committed to apartheid and ruled by a small but powerful white minority. I was not to visit South Africa again for 37 years because I was on a prohibited immigrant list along with a host of others world-wide who made up an informal fraternity engaged in anti-apartheid activities.

This time the feeling of euphoria growing out of the rapid change from an apartheid police state to a free and democratic society was expressed by everyone we met. We were overwhelmed by the people we talked with and what we saw.

The spirit of reconciliation, in spite of long years of suffering, was unbelievable. President Mandela had especially invited his jailers to be present at his inauguration and had specifically recognized them. Rev. Michael Lapsley, an Anglican priest who was chaplain for the ANC in exile in Zimbabwe and who lost both hands and one eye from a parcel bomb sent by government agents, said it was exceptional to find anyone who wanted revenge.

When we were in the Eastern Cape city of Port Elizabeth, the new mayor was the first Black mayor of a South African city. He had been imprisoned for many years on Robben Island, the Alcatraz of South Africa.

But the problems which confront the new South Africa are daunting. The legacy of apartheid is still very much present. Five percent of the people have 88% of the wealth. Seven million Africans are living in squatter settlements with no electricity, running water or sewage disposal. In Khayelitsha, one African township near Cape Town, there is 60% to 65% unemployment among the million people living there.

There can be a crisis of expectations very soon. Nothing has

really changed yet. The question came up in our discussions constantly, "Can a generation of resistance be transformed into a generation of reconstruction?"

There are some hopeful signs in the midst of these challenging problems. It is heartening to see that the highly publicized violence in South Africa is abating. Two years ago when I was in South Africa, several meetings in townships had to be canceled because of the threat of internal violence. Nothing of that sort occurred this time.

We visited one township near Durban in Natal where hundreds had been killed before the election. We saw the shanty huts that had been destroyed in the fighting. One section of the township had Inkatha members and another ANC. Finally negotiations had led to a cease fire and a reconciliation agreement. We heard the sounds of saws and hammers as houses were being rebuilt rather than burned. A hopeful sign.

Is the new Government of National Unity under the leadership of the ANC capable of rebuilding a new South Africa? Of course only time will tell.

I had a chance to talk with Joe Slovo, the government minister who has the awesome task of overseeing the plan for providing homes for seven million homeless people and improving services to the African townships. As he soberly said, "We have only two or three years to show that changes can be realized."

I returned from South Africa more convinced than ever that ACOA must continue its work. A constructive U.S. policy, based on democracy and mutual respect, will be vital to the success of the reconstruction effort. It is highly unlikely that we will have such a policy without vigilance and pressure from concerned Americans.

Already President Clinton has warned that he might deny South Africa some U.S. aid if Nelson Mandela continues to refuse to send troops to Haiti. This may be a sign of things to come.

The new South Africa needs to be able to shape its own policies without outside pressure. U.S. aid should be used to help overcome the terrible legacy of apartheid not to force acquiescence to U.S. wishes.

I believe this shows clearly why ACOA needs to continue and expand its work. I hope that you will give as generously as you can just as you have in the past.

Sincerely,



George M. Houser
Executive Director Emeritus