

COMMITTEE FOR THE DEFENSE OF BREYTEN BREYTENBACH
2853 Ontario Road, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20009

New York, N.Y., June 6--On June 20th Breyten Breytenbach, white South Africa's most renowned literary and artistic figure--the recent recipient of both Europe and South Africa's highest literary awards--will stand trial under the Vorster regime's infamous Terrorism Act for the second time in two years.

It is expected that the trial will be a test of the apartheid regime's ability to deal with "one of its own"; for Breyten Breytenbach, coming as he does from the heart of Afrikanerdom (his family is a staunch supporter of the Vorster government) represents perhaps a greater symbolic threat to apartheid than the millions of restive blacks. In terms of sheer military might, white South Africa can outbid the entire black African continent. What it cannot tolerate, however, is internal disunity. The Achilles heel of apartheid is the regime's ability to maintain a solid white front against an "external," darker enemy. Afrikaners pride themselves on the purity of their race and on their unique culture--a curious blending of nineteenth century European triumphalism and anti-imperialist defensiveness. As Afrikanerdom's most prized poet and artist, as the key interpreter of this cultural heritage, Breytenbach as an enemy of the state threatens that unity at its most vulnerable nexus.

The trial on June 20th is expected to receive international attention, as did the first trial in November 1975 at which Breytenbach was accused under the Terrorism Act and the Suppression of Communism Act of helping to set up an illegal organization to promote armed struggle in South Africa to overthrow the white government. He was sentenced to nine years imprisonment for this offense.

Prior to his arrest in 1975, Breytenbach had been living in self-imposed exile in Paris. His marriage to a Vietnamese woman made it impossible for the two of them to live as husband and wife in his native country. Under South African law, marriage between people of different races is forbidden. In Paris Breytenbach expressed through poetry and paintings of a surrealist character the alienation of a life lived in exile; another of his themes was the torturous nature of Afrikaner culture. He worked with anti-apartheid groups in Europe and founded Okhela, an anti-apartheid movement of white South Africans which this past year uncovered the conspiracy by which multinational oil companies have been supplying oil to Rhodesia in violation of U.N. sanctions. Breytenbach was arrested by the South African police in August 1975 while travelling inside South Africa in disguise and with false documents.

The earlier trial ended in a humiliating "confession" by Breytenbach in which he apologized to the state for "the ridiculous and stupid things I have done." The South African press and government propaganda machine portrayed Breytenbach at this time as a misguided romantic who had "been led astray" and was now returning to the fold. It was subsequently learned that his "confession" had won the release of eleven persons who had been arrested with him. A representative of the International Commission of Jurists who was an observer at the trial reported that "the Breytenbach case constitutes a remarkable success for the government. It has helped to impress upon the white community the image of a vast subversive conspiracy. It must be expected that the government will exploit this favourable situation by intensifying the repression . . . the Breytenbach trial, like many of those which preceded it, is to be seen as a lever which enables the white government to legitimate and reinforce its dictatorial powers and to pursue its policy of apartheid."

Breytenbach has been held in solitary confinement for the past two years.

Reports from reliable sources indicated that he had been severely tortured and that at one point earlier this year he had been suicidal. However, many believe that the new trial, and in addition the denial of a visitor's visa to his wife, indicates that Breytenbach may be beginning to fight back. It is expected that the charges this time will be even more severe than at the earlier trial and could likely result in the death penalty.