Statement Before the UN Special Committee Against Apartheid
on the Cultural Boycott of South Africa

by Paul Irish, Associate Director
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Thank you Mr. Chairman. As today people in the United States mark the birth of the President who signed the
emancipation for Americans of African descent, I hope you will
not mind if I begin with a brief historical footnote.

In the 1960's, the American Committee on Africa
initiated a campaign to enlist prominent actors, entertainers,
writers, playwrights, musicians and athletes to endorse a pledge
of no cultural contacts with South Africa until all South
Africans could enjoy its benefits on an equal basis. The pledge
was titled, "We Say NO to Apartheid". Among the early signatories
were Sidney Poitier, Harry Belafonte, James Baldwin, Arthur
Miller, Leonard Bernstein and Wilt Chamberlin.

It was a good idea then, and it is an equally good idea
today. ACOA is pleased to be a sponsor of
groups such as Artists & Athletes against Apartheid in the new
efforts to update, broaden and expand the list of those pledged
to boycott South Africa due to its policies of apartheid. And I
would like to mention at least two ways in which ACOA continues
to work in support of the struggle for South African freedom by
supporting the cultural boycott. First, through exposing the
facts, we have worked to halt performers going to South Africa,
and to stop the infiltration of South African racism in the US.
Secondly, and equally important, we have worked to bring to the
American people a powerful understanding of the struggle for freedom in South Africa by promoting examples of culture performed by those involved in the struggle which would otherwise never reach the American people.

Last year at about this time, the organizers of South Africa’s Sun City resort were working to ensnare perhaps the biggest name talent in the US since they opened with Frank Sinatra. But armed with the facts about the fraudulent “independence” of Bophuthatswana, Bennett rejected the highly lucrative offer, and in the words of one entertainment columnist, “He told them what they could do with their Krugerrands”. Bennett felt he did not need public recognition for doing what was right, so ACOA was pleased to be the first to announce his decision.

Later last year, the Sun City organizers tried a new approach, attempting to buy their way into US talent by erecting a $300 million casino in Atlantic City as their base. ACOA worked with the local coalition opposing the development, testified before the Atlantic City Council, supplied key information on the South African ownership to the New Jersey Casino Control Commission and contributed to the public pressure which forced Southern Sun Hotels to drop their bid.

We cannot stop the South Africans from offering extravagant sums to US performers to play in South Africa, and perhaps we cannot stop performers from going whose only concern is their own financial betterment, however by exposing the truth on the system of apartheid, and in particular the role played by the bantustans such as Bophuthatswana in the overall racist
scheme, we can effectively appeal to the conscience of those who do not wish to support apartheid.

When confronted with key facts about the system, it becomes more difficult to participate. I would like to refer to some of these facts, taken from a brief study on the role of Bophutatswana in South Africa's apartheid system, which ACDA will issue in the near future. For example:

South Africa claims that Bophutatswana represents the so-called "homeland" of the Tswana-speaking people, yet over half of them live outside its borders, and ironically, about one-third of those within its borders are non-Tswana.

The territory's 1.5 million square miles are divided into seven widely dispersed pieces of land spanning no less than three South African provinces.

Less than 3% of South Africa's wealth is produced in the bantustans, but even in Bophutatswana, which is home to platinum and Vanadium mines, 60% of the income came from outside its area at independence in 1976.

The mines employ less than 3% of the local population, and blacks still cannot supervise whites. Most workers must work as migrants inside South Africa or using South Africa's euphemism "commute" to jobs in white areas of South Africa where they cannot live.

The Sun City resort claims significant employment, yet when six black employees protested racial discrimination in pay scales last year, they were fired and evicted from their homes.

The resort claims that performances are before "mixed" audiences, yet a report on the performance of Liza Minellei
before 1,900 by The New York Times noted a lone black in
the orchestra section.

600,000 people live in the squatters camp of Winterveld
in Rophuthatswana, yet with the mineral wealth and casino income
not a single health clinic or school is provided. 85% of those
left behind in the territory must survive on subsistance
agriculture, yet only 10% of the land is arable.

We believe that exposure of these facts will make the
work of convincing performers not to play at Sun City easier and
we look forward to working with the Special Committee in
disseminating such material.

Finally, I would like to mention the work of the American
Committee on Africa in helping to bring the works of exiled black
South Africans to the American people. In particular over the
last year, ACOA has worked to tour the play by black South
African playwright and actor Sipho Marodi, "For Better Not for
Worse" to all parts of the US.