ACTION ALERT:

Human Rights Watch

The second floor of John Vorster Square police station in Johannesburg is notorious throughout South Africa. It is here that scores of opponents of apartheid have been held under a number of different laws, with no access to lawyers or family, with no charges brought against them, and in solitary confinement. This is one of the most telling expressions of the repressive nature of the apartheid regime. It is not uncommon for detainees to be held for 6 or 7 months, even a year. With detention comes harsh interrogation for long hours, more often than not accompanied by torture.

Many of the 62 detainees who have died in custody since 1963 were held at John Vorster Square including trade union organizer Neil Aggett. The South African government maintains that most detainees took their own lives. Evidence brought forward at inquests and from testimony of other detainees demonstrates that most of these deaths occurred during, or as a result of, the most brutal torture.

Now the police have introduced a new form of harassment of political opponents: constant, closed-circuit, television surveillance of detainees in their cells. The South African government contends that such surveillance will prevent suicide.

In May this year, Peter Mokgoba a high school student leader found himself under 24-hour, closed-circuit, television surveillance while detained for twelve days at John Vorster Square. At a press conference in Johannesburg called by the Detainees' Parents Support Committee at the end of June, Mr. Mokgoba said that he saw the camera in the corner of his cell when he entered. "I couldn't help but be curious about it. I was told by the policeman who was watching the people in the cells that it was closed circuit television and that they were able to see me in my cell even if they were not right inside with me." In addition to the camera, there is an intercom into each cell. "They are able to talk to you. So maybe if you are doing something they don't like they can tell you to stop."

The cell is the one place that provides some privacy. Peter Mokgoba stated that at first he was able to relax when he entered his cell - until he found out that he was being watched. This affected him deeply and a depression set in.

Said Reverend Frank Chikane, Vice-President of the United Democratic Front, who had been detained for a long period in 1982: "My problem with this particular move is that it adds to the tensions which come from interrogation. Some of us are witnesses to the methods of torture used and
those methods are so crude that by the time you get back to the cell you actually have nightmares. You are never sure when the police are coming. You need to run around. You need to sing, you need to talk aloud in order to keep yourself alive. My experience is that at some stage you can no longer differentiate between what you knew before you went into interrogation and what you were told by the police. It is a matter of struggle to say: 'This knowledge is not my knowledge. I got it from the interrogators'. This is going to produce more mentally affected people than before. A detainee's survival is dependent on how many stupid things you can do in the cell so that you can keep your sanity."

Lawyer Nicholas Haysom, who has spent three periods in detention himself, charged that the measure "shifts the spotlight both figuratively and physically on the detainee himself and perpetuates a notion that he is to blame for his suicide. The cure for suicide, it need hardly be added, is adequate access to both legal representatives and the outside world, and legal protection for detainees in the interrogation room."

A spokesperson for the Detainees' Parents Support Committee emphasized that solitary confinement itself is a form of torture.

All detention without charges or trial is offensive to basic human rights, particularly when implemented by the regime representing the white minority in South Africa. Cell surveillance adds further torture to the offense.

We urge you to support the detainees by protesting the surveillance and all detention to the South African authorities and by urging the US government to protest.

Copies of your protest may be sent in support to the Detainees' Parents Support Committee in South Africa and to ACOA.

The addresses are listed below:

Louis Le Grange  
Minister of Law and Order  
Union Buildings  
Pretoria, South Africa

Hon. George Shultz  
Secretary of State  
Washington D.C. 20520

Copies to:

The Detainees' Parents Support Committee  
P.O. Box 39431  
Bramley, Transvaal 2018  
South Africa

American Committee on Africa  
198 Broadway  
New York, NY 10038

July 17, 1984  
Jennifer Davis  
Executive Director