



American Committee On Africa

198 Broadway, New York, N.Y. 10038 / (212) 962-1210 / Cable AMCOMMAF

STATEMENT TO THE UNITED NATIONS ON THE 25TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE SHARPEVILLE MASSACRE

Stephanie Urdang, Research Director
March 22, 1985

Mr. Chairman, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is an honor, on behalf of the American Committee on Africa, to address this meeting today in commemoration of the massacre at Sharpeville twenty-five years ago.

The year that has past since the 1984 United Nations commemorative meeting has been a particularly significant one in the history of struggle for justice against the repressive apartheid state. New levels of protest and resistance against the apartheid regime spread across the country which was met by heightened repression. It is hard to remember a year when the South African authorities were less in control. From one end of the country to another, in major cities and in tiny towns, hundreds of thousands of black students demonstrated and boycotted classes and closed down schools. The newly formed United Democratic Front launched a successful boycott against the elections for a fraudulent new parliament. The country's industrial heartland around Johannesburg was paralysed by a two-day general strike which was 90 to 100 percent effective. An actions by the liberation movements continued. The whole period was marked by predawn raids and mass arrests and the killing of over 200 men, women and children by police fire. The new image with its so-called reforms that the South African government was trying to present to the world with was shattered. The answer is not reform, but a total dismantling of the apartheid regime. The message is clear: The apartheid system with its repressive rule cannot be allowed to continue.



It is a message that has been carried far beyond the borders of South Africa. In the United States of America, too, the anti-apartheid campaigns have gained new momentum. Activity was spurred both by events inside the country and by the award of the 1984 Nobel Peace prize to Bishop Desmond Tutu, Bishop of Johannesburg.

A major thrust of anti-apartheid activities in the United States has been the growing divestment movement of which the American Committee on Africa has played a key role. It is a campaign that has involved many different organizations and individuals. The results have been quite dramatic. At this moment 27 state legislatures and numerous city councils are actively debating divestment legislation aimed at ending the investment of public funds in banks and corporations doing business in or with South Africa. These bills follow the successful passage of such legislation in five states, namely Connecticut, Maryland, Massachusetts, Michigan and Nebraska, and in 20 cities. The United States Conference of Mayors passed a resolution in January, calling for the direct removal of any public funds by cities now invested in institutions doing business with South Africa. In addition a number of bills are now before the US Congress. By the end of 1984, state and municipal actions across the United States had mandated the withdrawal of over \$1.3 in public funds from companies doing business in South Africa. Several hundred million dollars had already been divested.

In this very city where the United Nations has its headquarters, a strong divestment bill is currently being debated. As a result of negotiations between the City Administration and the Municipal workers union, District Council 37 AFSCME, the Mayor requested the support of the City Council leadership to ensure passage of the bill. These negotiations resulted from strong labor and community support for the first draft of the

bill. It will prohibit the deposit of city funds in banks which make loans to the South African government or advertise or promote Krugerrands. It will also ban city purchases of South African goods and severely restrict purchases from corporations which sell to the South African military, police, prisons, or the Ministry of Cooperation and Development. This follows on the decision in August last year by trustees of the New York City Employment Retirement System to divest from all corporations operating in South Africa, except those judged to be actively aiding the struggle against apartheid. An estimated \$665 million will be affected.

In Massachusetts the role of an effective coalition of labor, religious, civil rights and community groups played a crucial role in securing the withdrawal of all state pension funds from corporations doing business in South Africa. This was followed by a Boston ordinance prohibiting investment of public funds in any bank with outstanding loans to South Africa or Namibia or any corporation doing business in South Africa.

These are but a few examples of the results of an active divestment campaign in this country which has kept the American Committee on Africa extremely busy. Our activities have included testifying at state and city hearings, monitoring the campaigns progress, working with legislators in formulating bills. Our staff have been interviewed by numerous publications and have provided back ground information from our files for journalists working on stories. During the last few months all the major newspapers, many smaller news papers and national weeklies have covered the issue.

This intensifying pressure is hitting home in South Africa itself where not a week goes by without the divestment campaign being attacked in

the press. It is of course a crime to advocate divestment or other economic actions against apartheid in South Africa. In terms of the Internal Security Act (1982) such advocacy is punishable by up to 20 years in prison - regardless of whether the crime was committed inside the country or out. This has not stopped many South Africans from speaking out in favor of disengagement.

The South African government, which liked to pretend that the divestment movement did not exist, is now openly admitting its significance. Comments are no longer restricted to some anonymous spokesperson. They include both senior government Ministers and representatives of many of the so-called "private organizations" that promote South African policies in the United States and are in the forefront of the anti-divestment campaign. All of these speakers are being forced into greater honesty. One such organization is the South African Foundation based in Washington D.C. The Foundation director told the Johannesburg Financial Mail in February that: "In one respect at least, the divestment forces have already won. They have prevented - discouraged, dissuaded, whatever you call it - billions of dollars of new U.S. investments in South Africa. They have discouraged new companies, new investors who were looking for foreign opportunities from coming to South Africa." This reads like a message of congratulations to the divestment campaign.

Other activities with which the Committee is involved includes those undertaken by college and university students. Two weeks of action were initiated by the American Committee on Africa in keeping with a resolution passed at a United Nations student conference organized by the Centre Against Apartheid last June. Anti-apartheid protests throughout the United States were sparked off yesterday - the 25th anniversary of Sharpeville and

will continue through April 6, the commemoration of the hanging of African National Congress freedom fighter, Solomon Mahlangu. The events will be highlighted by a national protest day for divestment on April 4, the anniversary of the assassination of Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. Actions are planned at over twenty campuses.

In addition the Committee is an active member of a coalition which is planning a four day protest in Washington DC and other cities in the United States in April. One of the four themes for the protest calls for opposition to U.S. government and corporate support for apartheid.

Greater public awareness is an important element in the continuing campaign against the horrors of apartheid. In its ongoing efforts to get information on South Africa out to the public, the Committee has continued to produce concise publications which focus on different aspects of the apartheid and the divestment campaign. Some of these have been published in conjunction with the Centre against Apartheid.

In a speech to a recent Mozambique-South Africa solidarity gathering in Maputo, an ANC speaker described the ongoing conflict in South Africa today. The South African regime is like a house owner besieged by a cyclone, she said. When he closed the front door the wind blew in the back. And when he shut the windows the roof blew off. And when he erected a temporary covering for the roof, the walls fell in.

The South African regime still has massive resources. It still has the support of major foreign corporations and of powerful Western leaders. All these may help to hold the structure together for a while, but in the end the walls of apartheid will not stand against the force of the cyclone.

Thank you.