Dear RAN Member:

I just returned from an ecumenical solidarity trip to Southern Africa. I visited South Africa, Zimbabwe, and Mozambique in three weeks with a group of pastors, activists and lay people, staying in families' homes. This enabled me to see apartheid in some of its many manifestations; rural and urban settings within South Africa and its long arm of destabilization in the region. I would like to share a few stories from this experience with you.

In the northeastern tip of South Africa, some miles north of Johannesburg, in what the South African government likes to call the Lebowa homeland, is a rural community known as Mangata. We stayed in this village for seven days, humbled by an indescribable hospitality. There werenumerable feasts where the entire village came out, children's groups made presentations of song and dance, everyone was fed and no one was turned away. But the warmth that this community exhibited was sharply contrasted by the cold and harsh reality of apartheid.

The same children who created songs and dances of welcome us were attending an overcrowded school which their parents had to raise the money to build. The community built the school themselves. Only after the structure was erected did they qualify to receive monetary assistance for education from the South African government. Additionally, irrespective of the school population the government only pays for two high school teachers. The additional and essential school personnel's salaries are paid out of school fees collected from the parents. These children walked up to four miles on dirt roads every day to and from school.

Just fifteen minutes away in the conservative white community of Pietersburg, white children attend a spacious, landscaped school. The school budget is paid out of state taxes since education for whites is free and compulsory.

In Alexandra, the oldest Black township in South Africa, located just outside the white suburbs of Johannesburg, we were met with the brutal reality of urban apartheid. Declared an "unrest area", the new term for the local states of emergency which give the government broad powers of detention without trial, charge, or benefit of attorney or doctors, an 8:00 p.m. to 5:00 a.m. curfew was put in effect. There is to be no one on the streets between that time. Thousands of shacks made of cardboard, plastic and, if they're "lucky", corrugated iron, stand crammed together with no running water, electricity, or toilets. At about six o'clock in the evening a dark cloud covers the valley as people begin cooking their evening meals on coal and wood burning stoves. Due to the congestion of the area, the air gets so heavy and thick that it is literally an effort to breathe. The air itself is violent.
We also saw evidence of the more classical manifestations of South African violence. My group and I were followed and videotaped by South African police. A South African Defense Force “hippo” (small tank) was visible every night about three or four shacks down from where I was staying. Equipped with automatic rifles and large vicious dogs, the police made repeated visits to a small mom and pop store where they helped themselves to beer every night without paying for it.

In Mozambique, the long arm of apartheid was manifested in the terrorist contra group RENAMO, sponsored by the South African government to destabilize the independent government of Mozambique. In a refugee camp in northern South Africa called Hluphekani, or literally Place of Suffering, we spoke to several people who were victims of RENAMO or who had fled Mozambique to avoid becoming RENAMO victims. There were thousands of people there, who had left everything: farms, homes, families to escape RENAMO brutality. They were clothed in rags, without shelter, and underfed, but without exception, absolutely convinced that they had done the right thing by leaving. Mothers spoke of the assurance of having their children with them. Young boys expressed relief that here they did not have to worry about being kidnapped, killed, or forced by RENAMO to commit atrocities.

One 17-year-old boy told us that he had been kidnapped by RENAMO, trained for two weeks, and forced to ambush trucks carrying goods, murdering the drivers and other unfortunates who happened to be in those trucks. He took sick, due to inadequate nutrition and was left to die alone. Miraculously, he was able to get to a neighboring village that took him to a health post where he recuperated. He was in the camp awaiting transportation back to his village, some 200 miles away, where he hoped his family had been able to remain without further RENAMO attacks.

I share what I've seen with you because I believe it is important for us all to know that President De Klerk did not rid the earth of apartheid with a few strokes of his pen. Apartheid still exists, not only legally, but especially in the daily lives of the people, where nothing has changed. The people of South Africa are not going to give up their struggle until their vision of a free South African society has been realized, despite President Bush's treacherous and untimely lifting of sanctions. Therefore, our efforts should be redoubled now when the Bush administration seems to be digging in its heels in its war against the people of South Africa. President Bush attributed the changes in that country to the leadership of De Klerk, not to the struggle of the people within and without South Africa against apartheid. This should not surprise us, though, because we know Bush has never held stock in sanctions against South Africa. President Reagan’s veto had to be overridden to get sanctions in the first place.

Nevertheless, the battle is not over. Now that the Bush administration has shown its true colors, and drawn the battle lines, it's time for a counter attack. It is important for us to take the initiative in acts of solidarity with the people of South Africa. We have two imperatives in the remaining weeks of the summer:

First, we should contact our Congressional Representatives and Senators. Urge them to vote a condemnation of the lifting of sanctions, and to find a way to challenge this decision. Remind them that the conditions set out in the Comprehensive Anti-Apartheid Act of 1986 for the lifting of sanctions have not, in fact, been met, despite President Bush's claims to the contrary.

Second, we should make sure that local sanctions remain in place. Urge your mayors, governors and local university presidents to openly declare that their sanctions against South Africa will remain in place until free and fair elections have taken place under a new constitution.

Aleah Bacque
RAN Coordinator