APARtheid's DETAINees AND POLITICAL PRISONERS: A BRIEFING SHEET

More than 30,000 South African opponents of apartheid have been detained without trial since the imposition of the State of Emergency on 12 June 1986. Men, women and children have been detained for periods as long as a year or more. Of these 30,000, some 3,500 are still in detention. The majority of detainees are 25 years of age or younger, with approximately one-third under the age of 18. Additionally, unknown numbers of people in Namibia, South Africa's illegal colony, are victims of this same repression.

WHO'S BEING JAILED?

Over 30,000 have been detained without charge or trial without any access to lawyers, family or religious counsel. Thousands more have been charged and are presently awaiting trial for political crimes. Additionally, there are hundreds of long term political prisoners, such as Nelson Mandela and Zephania Mothopeng, who have been tried and convicted.

ALL OF THEM PRISONERS OF CONSCIENCE WHO DARED TO OPPOSE APARTHEID.

PATTERNS OF DETENTION

Detention is widespread throughout South Africa and Namibia. Those detained range from a man of 87 to a child of 11. Detainees include workers, trade unionists, teachers, students, priests and nuns. Although the government sometimes seems indiscriminate in its detention of its opponents, it is quite calculating in choosing its targets. Through these detentions the government is attempting to destroy all of the forces struggling non-violently to end apartheid. Democratic student, community, religious, and labor groups have been forced into a shadowy, semi-legal existence because most of their leadership is in detention or in hiding.

THE LAWS THAT HOLD THEM

Apartheid's judicial and legal system provides the state with sweeping power to detain individuals for activities viewed as illegal or threatening to the status quo. Such crimes include calling for sanctions, throwing stones at an army tank, and displaying the symbols of banned organizations. The 1982 Internal Security Act is the main pillar of this power. Additionally, the present State of Emergency regulations allow for the incommunicado detention of individuals by even the lowest ranking army private or police officer for an initial 14 day period. The government can then extend the detention indefinitely, subject only to review by the Minister of Law and Order every six months.

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PRISON CONDITIONS

Prison conditions are inhumane. According to one report, some South African jails are operating at 300% of maximum capacity. Toilet facilities are often nothing more than a filthy bucket on the floor, and detainees are often denied food for days at a time. Many are forced to sleep on thin, lice ridden mattresses placed on the floor with no blankets or sheets.

TORTURE

Torture is commonplace in and widespread throughout apartheid’s jails. This torture takes the form of both mental and physical abuse. Common methods of torture include beatings, electric shock treatment, abuse of genitals and food and sleep deprivation. According to a study conducted by the National Medical and Dental Association of South Africa, 89% of those interviewed reported having been physically beaten, while 79% reported having been mentally abused. There are also instances, most notably the Steve Biko case, where torture has resulted in death in detention at the hands of the apartheid security forces. Twenty-six people are known to have died in police hands under these conditions in the last three years.

RESISTANCE AND PROTEST

Despite the increased repression of the apartheid system, resistance to detentions and demands that all detainees and political prisoners be unconditionally released have intensified. National organizations such as the Detainees’ Parents Support Committee, and efforts such as the Release Mandela Campaign, the Free the Children Alliance and the Save the Thirty-two campaign are testimony that as the state increases its brutality, the people will increase their opposition.