Detroit Seminar on Role of Transnational Corporations in South Africa and Namibia

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STATEMENT TO DETROIT SEMINAR ON ROLE OF TRANSNATIONAL CORPORATIONS IN SOUTH AFRICA AND NAMIBIA, FRIDAY, JUNE 12, 1981

I am happy to convey to this Seminar the greetings, solidarity and congratulations of the World Council of Churches. The WCC is a fellowship of churches bringing together some three hundred churches from over one hundred countries of the world.

Mr. Chairman,

As recently as August last year the Central Committee of the WCC called upon its member churches and all Christians:

"to press governments and international organizations to enforce comprehensive sanctions against South Africa, including a withdrawal of investments, an end to bank loans, arms embargo and oil sanctions and in general for the isolation of the state of South Africa." (1)

From as long ago as 1928 the ecumenical movement, then speaking through the International Missionary Council, voiced concern about the relationship between organized racism and political and financial support for maintaining racism. Since 1969 through the Special Fund to Combat Racism the WCC has given over US$ 2,500,000 in humanitarian grants to the liberation movements of South Africa and Namibia. During the 1948 First Assembly of the WCC, in Amsterdam in a statement called "the Social Function of the Church", the Assembly stated that the church could only say "a convincing word" to society about justice and human dignity if it took steps to eliminate the practices of discrimination and segregation.

In these positions and others we know that we are not alone. We join a vast assembly of countries and organizations which are pressing for the complete isolation of South Africa and the fundamental eradication of apartheid. We note that the OAU has repeatedly called for "the mobilization of world public opinion in support of the effective application of economic and other sanctions against South Africa." (2)

(1) Document No. 33, Statement on South Africa, August 1980

Recent international UN and NGO Seminars on transnational corporations, oil, arms violations and bank loans have stated clearly "That there must be sanctions applied against the South African apartheid regime." In spite of the triple veto exercised by South Africa's traditional allies, France, Britain, and the USA, the 30 April 1981 overwhelming vote in the UN Security Council in support of the resolutions brought in by the UN Africa Group signals the increasing and inevitable isolation of the Apartheid regime in the community of nations.

Friends, apartheid is far from eradicated. This seminar is but part of our work of pressing anew for sanctions against apartheid. Developments in South Africa, and global developments wherein key Western countries are openly embracing the South African police state, should only serve to intensify our ardour to combat the apartheid regime. Apartheid is clearly gaining new friends in the West. A document recently released to the world's press dated May 14, 1981 shows Chester Crocker opining to Secretary of State Haig the following highly revealing thoughts:

"A relationship initiated on a cooperative basis could move forward toward a future in which South Africa returns to a place within the regional framework of Western security interests... We can work to end South Africa's polecat status in the world and seek to restore its place as a legitimate and important regional actor with whom we can cooperate pragmatically. You will also need to respond with an artful combination of gestures and hints. The gestures would include, as described in the attached paper, small but concrete steps such as the normalization of our military attache relationship."

There is a statistic from a recent brilliant paper which summarily describes the apartheid nazism system which is being shored up by Western multinationals like the Big 3 of Detroit. It is that "someone dies in a South African factory or mine every three and 1/2 hours on average and every hour of every day forty people are injured - 4 of them permanently!" But it is not only the everyday statistics of apartheid that compels us to show our solidarity.

Today the South African State has developed what it calls a "total strategy" to contend with both its internal threats and the growing international pressure to isolate it. Essentially, this "total strategy" is to militarize every sphere of South African society.
In June 1980 the 'National Key Points' Act was passed. This Act made possible the establishment of military bases within the facilities of various multinational companies. So far over 600 companies, domestic and multinational, have been designated 'National Key Points'.

From a total strength of 260,000 in 1974 the total number of troops under arms in South Africa now approximates nearly 500,000; a defense budget which was $933 million for 1974/75 is estimated at a phenomenal $2.9 billion in 1979/80. White, school-aged children - boys and girls aged 11-15 - are now being primed for military service through secondary school cadet programmes and adventure camps, which include political indoctrination courses, marksmanship and "terrorist hunts." Lastly, apartheid's militarization includes the creation of "ethnic battalions" - the drafting (with widespread coverage and publicity!) of blacks and coloureds into combat roles.

Today the South Africa regime continues to provide secret funds and engage in secret projects such as efforts to purchase many US newspapers, television and radio stations, in short, to wage "dis-information" offensives against persons and organizations like the South African Council of Churches (SACC), the All Africa Conference of Churches (AACC) and various anti-apartheid organizations around the world. We at the WCC especially note the growing attacks by the South African regime on church people who are exercising their ministry in Namibia and South Africa. These attacks on pastors and church workers - ranging from seizure of passports and bannings to torture and detentions - are one part of a continuum of South African aggression, which now includes daily military attacks, raids, and subversion aimed at refugee centers in neighbouring African countries. We urge the Detroit church community to intensify their solidarity with those inside giving witness. Far from any pretense at a peaceful resolution of the Southern African conflicts, these activities demonstrate the regime's resolve to turn Southern Africa into a theater of war, including if necessary, the use of nuclear weapons.
Mr. Chairman, In spite of the obstacles which continue to daunt international efforts, we are strengthened and inspired by the struggle inside South Africa. Let us remember that our work is empowered not only by our belief that "racism is a sin against God and against fellow human beings" but also by the generations of brave and visionary people who have resisted and fought and whose inheritors continue to do so inside South Africa today.

Mr. Chairman,

Our colleague Bishop Desmond Tutu has been widely quoted recently for saying:

"Those who invest in South Africa should please do so with their eyes open. They must not delude themselves that they are doing anything for the benefit of blacks. Please let us at least get rid of this humbug. They must understand that they are buttressing one of the most vicious systems since Nazism." (3)

What he went on to say, and what was not so widely quoted, is that in South Africa today there is a growing hatred and hostility especially amongst younger blacks determined to be free. "They are committed" he pointed out, "in the face of police dogs and bullets, tear gas, prison and even death in their determination to usher freedom into South Africa, for both Black and White". The resistance intensifies and escalates today as evidenced in the recent protests against Republic Day, the coloured school children's continuing boycott, and the labor struggles around Ford and Firestone.

Mr. Chairman,

We urge the Detroit community to continue the work, multiply this seminar into a thousands. Let our few become thousands of mobilized Detroit citizens. We approach this most important seminar conscious of the fears and failures of the churches, and conscious of the continuing challenge which the dismantlement of the apartheid system represents for all of us. We would like to leave with the sponsors and workers for this seminar our congratulations and our willingness to continue to work with you as you attempt the imperative work of taking this seminar and its results and multiplying them a thousand fold into educational/mobilizing workshops for locals, churches,

high schools and universities throughout greater Detroit. There is a momentous challenge before us just now. It is that of informing the American people so that they can act and not be silent before a virulent global growth of a deadly variant of racism from Johannesburg to Detroit and from Atlanta to London. We also leave this seminar emboldened by knowing that in spite of those principalities which, like the Reagan administration, seek to embrace apartheid, nazism there is a growing tide of churches, unions, state and local governments, anti-apartheid groups and individuals, all of whom seek to be counted only with those brave people inside, black and white, men and women, who continue traveling the pathways of resistance. If there is one truth we can identify from the last two days it is that moment when John Gaetsewe said that theirs was not a struggle about the numbers of white collar employees or about toilets, it was about their desire to rule their own land.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, Madam Chairman, friends of Detroit, for this opportunity to share with you.