Disinvestment: Is It a Baha'i Issue?

â”€

Disinvestment:

Is It a Bahá'í Issue?

Marjan Nirou

published in dialogue1:1, pp. 10-16

Los Angeles: 1986

"Disinvestment: Is It a Bahá'í Issue?" by Marjan Nirou, in dialogue 1:1, pp. 10-12

Over the past months, the issue of economic sanctions against the government of South Africa has been the subject of much debate in the United States. These sanctions are intended as signals of disapproval and dismay over the racial policies of the South African government known as apartheid. Apartheid is the oppressive rule of the white minority over the blacks, which segregates the blacks from the whites, which gives no political power to the black majority, and which forces the blacks into the lowest economic strata of that society. Apartheid, in short, is legally enforced racism and is fundamentally at odds with the core principle of the revelation of Bahá'u'lláh: the oneness of humanity.

To give a detailed account of the unjust and oppressive nature of apartheid would be redundant (see “South Africa: Background,” p. 13) and would take us away from the main purpose of this essay, which is to examine the courses of action open to American Bahá'ís in response to the surge of anti-apartheid activity in this country. First, however, I will focus on the issue of divestment which is advocated by concerned citizens here in the United States.

The way many concerned groups and individuals in the United States have chosen to make a statement against legally enforced racism in South Africa is by advocating disinvestment. Disinvestment, or divestment, is the removal of funds from financial institutions with ties to South Africa and the shifting of stock holdings from companies investing in South Africa to those that do not. Some cities, states, and labor unions along with many financial, educational, commercial and religious institutions have already divested from South Africa.

Sanctions against the government of South Africa are not designed to ruin the South African economy. Economic sanctions are applied for the purpose of

pressuring that government to abandon its racially discriminatory policies and to offer moral support to non-whites in South Africa who are victims of apartheid. Recently a joint committee of both houses of Congress voted for a ban on the importation of South African gold coins to the United States and further bank loans to South Africa until Pretoria shows improvement toward the abolishment of apartheid.

Whether disinvestment is effective in pressuring South Africa to constitute reforms is a much debated question. There are those who argue that the pulling out of the U.S. companies and corporations will worsen the state of the black economy. Others, however, point out that it is only 1 percent of the blacks who are employed by these companies and their presence there does not significantly effect the remaining 99 percent of the black population. It is the whites who hold the reins of power and who are benefiting by the U.S. corporations and banks carrying out business as usual.

It is true that some black leaders inside South Africa do not call for disinvestment. Most of these leaders are recognized and financially supported by the South African regime and hence have a stake in the maintenance of the status quo. Black labor leaders have not made disinvestment central to their demands for change in the South African economy because they do not see this tactic ending the unfair labor situation of 99 percent of the black work force. Thus the predominantly black Federation of South African Trade Unions has simply stated it would “wholeheartedly” support international sanctions against South Africa if it had any assurance that this would bring about the political, economic and social changes desired by black workers. It should also be noted that many South African blacks have been reluctant to advocate disinvestment because to do so is considered a treasonable offense by the South African government.

Since the South African government imposed its “state of emergency” measures last July, black sentiment has decisively shifted towards approval of sanctions. In a recent Markinor poll of urban South African blacks, 77 percent favored sanctions while 21 percent thought sanctions would be wrong. (Earlier polls tended to show a slight black majority against sanctions. Most of those polled also indicated that they do not expect sanctions to be effective in dismantling apartheid but rather foresee civil war for their country.)

It has primarily been the religious leaders of South African blacks who have courageously called for disinvestment. Moderate church leaders such as Rev. Allan Boesak and Nobel laureate Bishop Desmond Tutu have advocated disinvestment and economic sanctions because they regard it as the right moral choice for those outside of South Africa to make, even if it might cause blacks to suffer additional hardships. South African religious leaders emphasize the moral demands presented by apartheid to people of faith. Bishop Tutu maintains that “[t]his ideology, this policy is not just wrong; it is not just one that causes pain to people. Apartheid denies essential aspects of our faith. And we have to speak of it in religious terms, not just political terms, because it has been buttressed by others, or they have sought to buttress it, justify it,

on biblical grounds." Consequently, the South African Council of Churches adopted a proposal by Rev. Boesak to call on churches in other countries to divest their holdings linked to South African businesses as the best means for those outside of South Africa to work for peaceful change in their country.

There is no question that as Bahá'ís we are fundamentally opposed to racism. But how do we respond to the surge of activism condemning apartheid here and now? Do we join those who are making a moral statement by divesting from South Africa? Are Bahá'ís allowed to use or support economic boycott as an instrument against injustice? Does disinvestment activity entail partisan involvement in politics? And finally, what about the Bahá'ís inside of South Africa—would any anti-apartheid statement made here affect them negatively?

Let's first look at the question of whether disinvestment activity entails partisan involvement in politics. Though the Bahá'í teachings call for non-involvement in politics, this does not mean that we should refrain from all political involvement. 'Abdu'l-Bahá warned against getting involved in political movements that lead to sedition but allowed Bahá'ís to "hold political office and be interested in politics of the right type" (Promulgation of Universal Peace, p. 238). In the U.S., the effort to insure that American investments do not work to maintain the status quo in South Africa is clearly non-partisan activity. A broad spectrum of citizens are working in a variety of ways to end American involvement in a system that denies basic human rights and equal opportunities on the basis of race. To become active in this movement does not involve partisan affiliation in any way. To support the movement for ethical investments is only "political" in the same sense that working for race unity, peace, disarmament, the equality of men and women, just distribution of wealth, or the establishment of a world commonwealth is "political." In working for these ideals, we will find ourselves engaged in creating a change in the distribution of power which is, in essence, politics. Supporting the movement to halt U.S. investments in South Africa should be regarded as political only in the broad sense of the "right type" of political activity encouraged by 'Abdu'l-Bahá.

But what about economic boycott, which is the specific political action involved in disinvestment? Is it appropriate for Bahá'ís to support use of this kind of sanction in order to promote social change? Two incidents come to mind from 'Abdu'l-Bahá's visit to the West.

During his travels in the United States, 'Abdu'l-Bahá checked into a hotel only to discover that he was staying in a segregated establishment. He promptly removed himself and his entourage from this hotel for more suitable lodging. This incident provides Bahá'ís with an important lesson from the True Exemplar of our Faith. 'Abdu'l-Bahá simply would not countenance any kind of compromise of his passionate commitment to race unity. He preferred to demonstrate his disapproval of racism by boycotting a company that practiced discrimination in its conduct of business.

'Abdu'l-Bahá was frequently questioned on the means for establishing peace

and justice in the world. At one point he emphatically advocated the use of economic sanctions to achieve social and political changes. He demanded that "financiers and bankers must desist from lending money to any government contemplating to wage an unjust war upon an innocent nation." Furthermore, he called on transportation companies to "refrain from transporting war ammunition…from one country to another" (Waging Peace, p 65). By encouraging banks and industries to use their economic power to fight social evils and not promote them, 'Abdu'l-Bahá establishes for Bahá'ís an important precedent which should guide our social action, not only in the case of establishing peace, but also towards establishing other fundamental Bahá'í principles.

From a Bahá'í perspective, ethics and morality must be an integral part of economic policy. Businesses have a responsibility for what interests their services promote. Clearly, 'Abdu'l-Bahá encouraged the use of economic sanctions and Bahá'ís should not fail to exercise support for this kind of action on the grounds that this is inappropriate behavior for Bahá'ís.

The question was raised earlier concerning the possibility of our actions here having a negative effect on Bahá'ís in South Africa. It is important that we maintain perspective regarding this question. Bahá'ís worldwide believe in the oneness of humanity and we must do everything in our power to establish it. This is a principle that cannot be compromised because it is fundamental to our belief. Upholding this principle will require pain and sacrifice at times. Doubtless, Bahá'ís in South Africa, the majority of whom are black, are also suffering and would like to see an end to apartheid. But they do not have the same courses of action open to them. As Bahá'ís living in the United States, enjoying the freedom of speech and action that we do, we can work for the elimination of apartheid in ways that our brothers and sisters there cannot.

In a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, we are reminded that "Our principle duty is undoubtedly to teach the Cause and help the administration of its affairs. But that is not the only one. The Cause will not attain its aim and usher in the great reign of peace unless the principles are put into practice. We have to assist the different movements which have progressive ideas and are striving for an aim similar to ours." (Bahá'í News, no. 10, Feb. 1926, p. 7)

American Bahá'ís are witnessing a movement that addresses itself to the racism perpetuated by the policies of the South African government. This movement takes on many forms, from acts of civil disobedience and denunciations of the South African government to sincere efforts by groups and individuals to ensure that U.S. investments do not encourage South African racism. The Universal House of Justice has recently commented that Bahá'ís should not organize to take part in demonstrations against the South African government, or any other government. But this leaves Bahá'ís free to engage in other activities that affirm our belief that "the policy of apartheid derives from racial discrimination, it cannot be accepted by Bahá'ís wherever, and in whatever form, it may be practised" (from a letter of the Universal House of

Justice to the N.S.A. of Bermuda, 18 August 1985). American Bahá'ís, like all Americans, have the right to ask that their government, financial institutions, and businesses be sensitive to the social and spiritual consequences of their activities. Bahá'ís are committed to working toward the oneness of humanity, and encouraging businesses and government to use their economic influence to combat racism is one peaceful and lawful means of advocating this central Bahá'í teaching. As the Universal House of Justice has stated in its peace statement:

Racism, one of the most baneful and persistent evils, is a major barrier to peace. Its practice perpetrates too outrageous a violation of the dignity of human beings to be countenanced under any pretext. Racism retards the unfoldment of the boundless potentialities of its victims, corrupts its perpetrators, and blights human progress. Recognition of the oneness of mankind, implemented by appropriate legal measures, must be universally upheld if this problem is to be overcome.

Marjan Nirou is a student at California State University, Northridge, where she is involved in university disinvestment activities.

"South Africa: background," in dialogue 1:1, pp. 13-16

The Republic of South Africa consists of over 472,000 square miles, making it a little larger than the territory formed by the states of Texas, Oklahoma, and New Mexico. Most of the country lies south of the tropics in a land blessed with a temperate climate and large tracts of arable land. South Africa also possesses an abundance of mineral resources: 70 percent of all known unmined gold in the world, 70 percent of the platinum, 60 percent of the diamonds, 75 percent of the chrome, 30 percent of the uranium, and 15 percent of the manganese ore. This abundance of agricultural and mineral riches had brought white South Africans prosperity, but only at the cost of immense black African suffering and abuse.

Today, the population of South Africa is estimated at about 31,000,000 — estimated because accurate records are not kept on the number of Africans. There are approximately 5,000,000 whites; about 3,000,000 coloreds (people of mixed race); about 1,000,000 Asians, mostly Indian background; and about 22,000,000 Africans. With the exception of farming regions, each race is required to live in separate areas.

It is difficult for those of us outside of South Africa to comprehend the degree to which racism has been woven into the fabric of South African life. No country or culture is immune from the twisted rationale for suppression based on racial differences. However, South Africa exhibits a unique fascination with race as a measure of persons and the basis on which the quality of life rests. Race classification and the body of laws to enforce separate and unequal development is central to the South African government’s effort to subjugate blacks and other non-whites. This rigid caste mentality has led to such absurd ends as recounted by Joseph Lelyveld in his new book, Move Your Shadow: “It is impossible to change your caste without an official appeals board ruling

that you are a different color from what you were originally certified to be. These miraculous transformations are tabulated and announced on an annual basis. In my first year back in South Africa, 558 coloreds became whites, 15 whites became coloreds, 8 Chinese became whites, 7 whites became Chinese, 40 Indians became colored, 20 coloreds became Indians, 79 Africans became coloreds, and 8 coloreds became Africans."

Apartheid philosophy does not consider Africans as members of a single race, but rather of different tribal groups, each with a distinct language and culture. Separate development is an effective means for fostering continued tribalism rather than African unity.

Apartheid boils down to a desperate attempt by the white Afrikaners to halt the forces at work in South Africa to forge a common society. Prior to the early years of this century, when southern Africa was still a predominantly rural country, the white and black tribes occupied clearly defined territories and managed their own affairs. Tensions were strong and frequently led to violence between different groups, but the violence was not simply black vs. white, as whites fought whites (Afrikaners vs. the British) and blacks fought blacks (Zulus vs. Xhosas).

Following World War II it became clear to many South Africans that their country was undergoing dramatic changes due to the forces of urbanization and industrialization. Rural blacks and whites were drawn to the cities, into the same environment, and were beginning to forge a common society in contrast to the previous separate tribal societies of the pre-industrial period. Both the Afrikaner and the African were being detribalized, and the urban Africans were becoming a new social group with the potential to develop a new society and nation in which the blacks would outnumber the whites.

The Afrikaner response to this was apartheid, apartness. Initially, apartheid was a simple legal maneuver to restore tribal separation within the urban setting. Racial ghettos were created by law while whites were assured privileged status. Whereas the majority of countries began to at least address the worst aspects of racism through legislation, South Africa swam against the currents of history and raised up a legal and economic system that was openly racist. In an attempt to maintain white dominance and privilege, the South African government enforced tribal segregation against the will of the South African majority. As a prominent African lawyer notes some years ago, "The African is moving away from tribalism and his aspirations are with the modern world. But the whites, for their own power reasons, are attempting to shove him back into the tribe."

There are two sides to the apartheid system: grand apartheid and petty apartheid. So called Afrikaner "reformers" have dramatically proclaimed that white South Africans must "adapt or die," and "reform" is the mot current of the apartheid regime. But these reforms deal almost exclusively with aspects of petty apartheid. Petty apartheid consists of overt and undisguised racial discrimination and segregation not unlike what was common in the United

States until recently. It is “Whites Only” signs in Johannesburg train stations and on Cape Town beaches. It is want ads that end with the indelicate proviso “Regrets — Europeans Only.” It is the candy counter in the trendy shopping mall that offers chocolates with a sign reading: “Nigger Balls — 2 cents.” Such blatant aspects of petty apartheid are still alive but gradually receding. When the South African government speaks of reform, they are referring to eliminating these embarrassing manifestations of white dominance.

Reform for the white South African government has never meant dismantling the main structures of grand apartheid. Grand apartheid has as its goal the establishment of tribal homelands, Bantustans, for each of the ten major tribal groups (see map). For the most part, the bantustans are barren wastelands incapable of supporting the populations forced to live there. All blacks considered “unnecessary” to the apartheid labor system are forced to live on these desolate wastelands, which make up only 13 percent of South Africa’s land. Whites, who make up about 16 percent of the population, thereby control 87 percent of the land. The white controlled land includes all of the country’s most fertile farmland, cities, and rich mineral deposits. The homeland’s exist as detention camps for a population referred to by the government as “surplus.” Faced with starvation on these arid lands, blacks migrate to the black townships on the outside of urban centers. Here, they are considered “illegals” and may be arrested and dumped back into their designated bantustan by the South African security forces.

Grand apartheid is based on the following laws and official policies of the South African government:

The Removals Program. Prior to 1913, Africans were permitted to buy land and they did this, usually as a community. In 1927, a law was passed permitting the government to expropriate black property. This law was rarely carried out until after the establishment of the National Party as the ruling party of South Africa in 1948. Since 1960, forced removal has become the first option of whites who view the black owned land as valuable or who simply want the Africans removed on principle. There is now an ongoing policy of expropriation and of moving the residents of these areas, known as “black spots,” to their tribal bantustan. There is supposed to be compensation for such seizures, but payment is only made if the inhabitants leave voluntarily. In the past 25 years, some 3 million blacks have been forcibly moved to their designated homeland.

The Pass Law and Influx Control Laws. These laws exist to control the movement of blacks from the rural areas to the urban centers. It is required that all men and women over the age of 16 carry a passbook. Without a passbook, a person cannot obtain work, own property, travel or get married. With a passbook, these activities can only be carried out after receiving permission and an appropriate stamp of approval for the passbook. If given permission, a black from the bantustans can work in urban areas, but only in certain classified jobs. Men must leave their families behind and live in run-down, single-sex hostels. These laws work to destroy black families, ensure unequal development,

and maintain white control of the economy. The racial divisions between blacks and whites are deep and daily worsened by the countless humiliations apartheid inflicts on South Africa's black majority.

Bantu Education. Like virtually everything else in South Africa, education is racially segregated by law. The black education system was formulated in 1953 by Dr. Hendrik Verwoerd. In a speech before Parliament of that year, Dr. Verwoerd introduced the Bantu Education Bill by questioning the usefulness of providing blacks with equal education opportunities. "What is the use," he asked, "of teaching the Bantu child mathematics when it cannot use it in practice? That is quite absurd." Verwoerd continued by pronouncing: "…if my department controls native education it will know for which types of higher profession the native can be trained, and where he will be able to use his knowledge to make a living. It will guide him, instead of allowing him to choose his own path in a direction he cannot find a sphere of activity, thus becoming a frustrated and dissatisfied being."

The Bantu Education Bill was passed into law and continues to restrict the development of blacks. The disparity between black and white schools is shocking. Schooling for whites is free and compulsory. Blacks must pay for their education, and schooling is not required of them. Many children end up working full-time in agriculture or at menial city work rather than attending school.

Education for blacks is inferior to that afforded whites. Black teachers receive much less professional instruction than their white counterparts. Classroom overcrowding in inadequate facilities is also a serious problem for black schools. The student/teacher ration for whites is 20 to 1. For blacks, the figure is 47 to 1. The lack of classroom facilities and trained instructors has led to a situation where more than half of South Africa's blacks drop out of school by the third grade level. The education disparity is even more severe on the university level. In university enrolment for whites was about 80,000 out of their 4.5 million population. Only 7,000 of the 21 million blacks in the nation attended a university in that same year.

Health care is another area where the gulf between the races is most obvious. Malnutrition is not a serious disease among white South Africans. But roughly one-third of the nation's blacks suffer from some serious dietary deficiency. Infant mortality for rural blacks is 31 times higher than it is for whites. In the rural tribal homelands where the government forces many blacks to live, about half the children born there die before the age of five. Measles, a disease that can be prevented by inoculation, is the leading cause of death among black children. Life expectancy for whites is 72 years; for blacks, it is 58 years.

The lack of doctors is another serious problem affecting health care for blacks. Even when health care is nominally available, it is overcrowded and understaffed. Soweto, a black township on the outskirts of Johannesburg, has only one hospital serving a population estimated at 2 million people.

Black anger towards the white apartheid regime escalated in 1985 bringing on a storm of violence in the townships. More than 1,000 blacks have died since rioting broke out over a year ago. President P.W. Botha's government has yet to produce any coherent response to the rising violence besides more violence. It has become clear to black and white South Africans and to foreign governments and involved observers, that the National Party has no intention of dismantling apartheid. Minor concessions and reforms of petty apartheid will not satisfy black demands. The minimum changes demanded by even conservative blacks include the end to the 87 percent/13 percent white/black division of land, the abolition of influx control laws, the dismantling of the bantustans, the end of forced removals, and, most fundamentally, one person one vote.

Change is coming to South Africa. Even for a growing number of white South Africans, "the unthinkable is now public conversation," observes Deon Geldenhuys, a political scientist at Rand Afrikaans University, the "unthinkable" in Afrikaner eyes being majority rule. But if apartheid's days are numbered, it still retains horrific capacities for violence. Its last gasps are likely to be brutal.

Prepared by Dialogue's editorial staff.

Letters to the editor, in Dialogue 1:2, p. 6

I was both surprised and relieved to see an article on disinvestment and South Africa in the first issue of Dialogue. It's encouraging that we Bahá'ís are opening up the channels to discuss more freely the issues that have been troubling many of us for a long time.

As a personal response to apartheid/disinvestment I have recently replaced my checking and credit accounts in Bank of America and First Interstate Bank with accounts in Chase Manhattan Bank and a local savings and loan. This action followed information obtained from Lawyers Against Apartheid and Investor Responsibility Research Center concerning banks that are not doing business with South Africa. Another well-known bank that issues credit cards nationally and that should be avoided is CitiCorp; in general, savings and loans are "clean" since their business dealings are within this country. There are different levels of "doing business with South Africa," and anyone wishing to know the status of a particular bank as of January 1986 can contact directly the above-named research center (IRRC) at 1755 Massachusetts Ave. NW, Suite 600, Washington D.C. 20036, tel. (202) 939-6500. Dialogue readers will be interested in knowing that the Northern Trust Bank in Chicago, the financial institution used by the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United States, is one of the "clean" banks, meaning that it has a policy prohibiting loans to South Africa, both to the public and private sector, and it has no outstanding loans there.

Besides making changes in our banking accounts, another action open to all of us is to join, even if only on the personal level, the international boycott of Shell Oil organized in the last few months. According to a recent article in The New York Times, South Africa's Achilles' heel is its lack of domestic

supply of oil; without the oil supplied by international oil companies, notably Shell's parent organization called Royal Dutch/Shell, "the wheels of apartheid would grind to a halt." After reading Marjan Nirou's article I seriously doubt that we'd see 'Abdu'l-Bahá fill up at a Shell station if He were with us to day. The national AFL/CIO office, 815 16th St. NW, Washington D.C. 20006, is anxious to receive our cut-up Shell credit cards. Let's send them in (I've recently sent in mine!) and be conscientious in avoiding the purchase of any Shell products. It's certainly the least we can do.

Eileen Estes
Santa Monica, California

In her article on South Africa divestment Marjan Nirou eloquently points out that ethics and morality must be an integral element of economic policy and that corporations, certainly the largest component of the American and world economy, must be held accountable for the interests they promote.

It was with this same recognition that more than 50 trade unions, church groups and civil rights organizations came together earlier this year to launch what has become the first international boycott drive against a major corporation whose investments support South Africa's brutal apartheid system: Shell Oil.

Shell and its corporate parent, Royal Dutch Shell, have emerged as key players in the South African economy as a result of Shell's vast holdings and trade with industrial and agricultural customers and its unique relationship as chief supplier of fuel to South Africa's police and military. Given Shell's record of complicity with the ruling apartheid government, which includes everything from union busting at the Rietspruit coal mine to conducting business in occupied Namibia in violation of United Nations' decrees, it is no surprise that Shell has been designated as the first boycott target by human rights activists in the U.S. and abroad.

By participating in the Shell boycott and refusing to purchase any Shell products, Americans are able to tell Shell and other large businesses that cooperation with apartheid—corporate as well as individual—is not acceptable under any circumstances. The boycott, which is being organized and supported by groups ranging from the AFL/CIO to Free South Africa Movement as well as by a host of groups throughout Europe and other regions, represents one of the first truly international responses by human rights supporters to the terror of apartheid. Its success significantly strengthens the hand of the freedom movement as it enters its most critical period ever.

Jim Grossfeld
Los Angeles Shell Boycott Coalition
Los Angeles, California

"South African Dialogue," by Steven Scholl, in Dialogue 1:3, pp. 4-5

A loyal reader from Indiana wrote to tell us how good it is to finally have a magazine like Dialogue. Reception of Dialogue in his area had been generally

positive, though one Bahá'í reacted strongly against the magazine. “It’s too controversial,” we were informed and “the Bahá'ís are not ready” for the kinds of discussions of current events and ideas as presented in our first two issues. It is not Dialogue's objective to publish inflammatory or intentionally controversial material. But we do want to look at what’s happening in our world and reflect on contemporary life from Bahá'í perspectives. We also want to look closely at what the Bahá'í community is up to and comment on our successes and failures with honesty.

Unlike our friend in Indiana, Dialogue's staff is confident that Bahá'ís are ready for a magazine that opens up new perspectives, advocates positions, and provides authors and readers a forum in which to passionately argue their ideas. No one will find unanimity among our writers or always agree with our content, but we hope Dialogue will always be stimulating, a source of fresh ideas and insights.

In our first issue, Marjan Nirou raised the question of Bahá'í responses to the movement to disinvest funds from institutions with links to South Africa. Citing several instances in which ‘Abdu'l-Bahá advocated more humane social and political conditions, Nirou argues that American Bahá'ís and Bahá'í institutions should be more involved in disinvestment activities. Jihmye Collins, Lawrence Miller, and Paul Caprez now respond. Miller and Caprez note that economic sanctions, in the South African situation, do not necessarily represent the only moral position. Caprez speaks of the liberal force that Western businesses, especially those companies that respected the Sullivan principles, have been in South African life. Miller calls on Bahá'ís to distinguish principles from tactics, rather than abandon the total Bahá'í revolutionary position for a minor tactic.

This response to the disinvestment movement by four Bahá'ís has kicked off a number of thoughts in my mind. My immediate reaction is: “If not disinvestment and/or sanctions, then what?” With the upcoming departure of General Motors, IBM, and Eastman Kodak, business analysts are predicting that the disinvestment parade will become a stampede. All recent polls show that South African blacks support economic sanctions, as do growing numbers of religious communities and their leaders. The argument that Western business involvement is a liberal force for change in South Africa has finally been rejected, even by long-time advocates of this position. Colby H. Chandler, chairman of Kodak, on announcing Kodak’s departure from South Africa stated, “We had hoped that by now the signs in South Africa concerning plans to dismantle statutory apartheid would be clear. Unfortunately, we cannot see with any certainty a time when South Africa will be free from apartheid.”

Most activists in the struggle for change and justice in southern Africa maintain that not doing business as usual with South Africa is the strongest legal and non-violent tactic that remains to bring about change. As an individual Bahá'í, that is a position I feel comfortable supporting.

But what about our collective position on South Africa as a Bahá'í community?

To use Miller’s term, I believe that the “locus of responsibility” in this situation is not restricted to one level of Bahá'í community life. Individuals and Bahá'í institutions must all ask: “How is the bank using our money?” “What’s going on with our money market investments and stock portfolios?” “Is there an effective way for Bahá'ís and their institutions to take a stand on financial ties to South Africa?”

In raising these questions, I am struck by the dilemma Jihmye Collins also sees: the lack of a well articulated Bahá'í position on South Africa. Collins observes that this leaves Bahá'ís with little to say when discussing the Bahá'í position on this crucial contemporary issue with those interested in the faith. What Dialogue's forum on apartheid highlights is that the Bahá'í community has not developed to the point where a broad consultation on issues like South African divestment, human rights, nuclear arms and power, hunger and the homeless can be accomplished effectively, allowing the wisdom generated through consultation to help develop institutional policies and plan our tactics. Collectively, we are at a loss to deal with social issues in a sophisticated and pragmatic manner.

We cannot magically pull a national Bahá'í policy out of thin air. For Bahá'ís to find their voice regarding apartheid, there must be a much wider discussion on the complex forces at play in southern Africa and the appropriate responses available to American Bahá'ís and their institutions. Dialogue, as an independent journal, is a useful forum for Bahá'ís to advance possible positions, and we have opened up the debate at one level. But this discussion and education needs to take place at Nineteen Day Feasts, Bahá'í winter and summer schools, in local workshops and study classes, and at district and national conventions. To make such nationwide and grassroots consultation possible, new forms of Bahá'í administrative procedures will need to be developed. For instance, national committees might be appointed that are responsible for educating Bahá'ís and developing programs to deal with peace, interfaith cooperation, human rights, and the economy. Clearly, the talent exists in the U.S. Bahá'í community for a much more far reaching religious and social agenda than we now find. The National Spiritual Assembly and the appointed institutions may begin exploring ways for tapping and unleashing this talent.

The popular phrase these days among Bahá'ís is that we have at long last emerged from obscurity. One of the repercussions of our higher profile in society is that we can no longer abstain from involvement with highly charged but critical social issues. The Bahá'í administration is, in ‘Abdu'l-Bahá’s words, “elastic” and open to changing circumstances. Organic was Shoghi Effendi’s favorite way of describing Bahá'u'lláh’s world order. We need to participate in the evolution of the Bahá'í system so that Bahá'u'lláh’s community may meet the demands of our age with a pragmatic and inspiring vision for a more just and peaceful world.

Response by Drew Remignanti, MD in Dialogue 1:3, p. 7

I have read the first issue of Dialogue and am pleased to find a periodical committed to serving as a forum for ideas and issues related to the Bahá'í Faith. It definitely helps to fill a void. I found the articles to be well written and thought provoking.

On the down side, however, I was disturbed by some of the uses of quotations from the Bahá'í scriptures. In “Releasing the Captive from His Chains,” Steven Scholl quotes Bahá'u'lláh: “Gird up the loins of thine endeavour, that perchance thou mayest release the captive from his chains, and enable him to attain unto true liberty.” The frightening aspect of this to me is the apparent literal interpretation of what seems an obviously metaphorical passage in order to justify a position. The phrase “true liberty” is used frequently by Bahá'u'lláh and never strikes me as referring to physical liberty. For instance, in another passage Bahá'u'lláh says, “Say: True Liberty consisteth in man’s submission unto My commandments, little as ye know it.” Obviously one can have true liberty even while in captivity. This mars an otherwise excellent article whose central issue I take no exception to. If one is attempting to convince Bahá'ís to support organizations like Amnesty International, using quotes in this manner may interfere with one’s goal.

In her article “Disinvestment: Is It a Bahá'í Issue?” Marjan Nirou quotes ‘Abdu'l-Bahá from Promulgation of Universal Peace as allowing Bahá'ís to “hold political office.” Dialogue’s non-Bahá'í readers may wonder why they have not heard of any Bahá'í politicians. The quote refers only to avoiding “political movements that lead to sedition” and makes no reference to the broader principle of “non-acceptance of political posts, non-identification with political parties, non-participation in political controversies, and non-membership in political organizations and ecclesiastical institutions,” as outlined by Shoghi Effendi in The Advent of Divine Justice.

Pretty strong words, those of Shoghi Effendi; yet I think they still allow Bahá'ís to become involved with social issues like those dealt with in Dialogue, even though these social movements will have inevitable political impact. The challenge for Bahá'ís is to be aware of the possibility of hidden agendas and to avoid entanglement in partisan issues. In August 18, 1986, issue of Newsweek, Amnesty International, along with America’s Watch Committee, was pointed out as drawing criticism for being “soft on the Sandinistas” in terms of reporting human rights abuses and harder on the contras. This bias may or may not exist, but Bahá'ís who join Amnesty International or any other organization should be careful to align themselves with the principles of the group that are consonant with Bahá'í principles rather than against another party, for example, the Reagan administration.

Responses, from dialogue 1:3, pp. 32-36

The following three contributions are responses to previous articles and opinion pieces in Dialogue. In our next issue we will continue our forum on South Africa with more reader responses to the South African situation plus an

interview with exiled South African activist the Rev. Motlalepula Chabaku.

Over the past several months, there have been many requests by a number of individuals and local and national assemblies for clarification and guidance on the issue of apartheid in South Africa. Having read and consulted on several replies, I still find myself with as much of a void of understanding as before. This is due, in part, to my own grasp of such terms as politics, political, government, support, assist, and demonstrations. I perceive a difference in their meaning in the context of the responses, and their meaning to most other Bahá'ís.

To begin with, there is a much broader issue at stake for Bahá'í consultation and action than the question of apartheid: namely, the universal lack of justice, equity, and human rights. Will Bahá'ís venture out into the world, acting on the principles of the Faith, or will they remain passive and inward, in the security and comfort of the friends and the love of Bahá'u'lláh? In this respect it is paramount that the word politics be defined in clear terms, since Bahá'ís generally do not understand its meaning, and fear of politics is the single most important contributing factor to the lack of participation by Bahá'ís in world affairs (i.e., "…bringing their Faith into a more dynamic engagement with contemporary intellectual, social, religious, apolitical, and cultural currents of thought and action" [Dialogue, vol. 1, no. 1]. However, this issue of apartheid provides a microcosm of global human rights inequalities in which politics can be defined.

By accepted definition, one understands politics to be the science of government, relating to its affairs. As an example, the president and the United States Congress officially perform wholly in an arena of politics. The nature of their action is the science of politics (representing this country's government), and is political.

While the friends are instructed by the Universal House of Justice that "they must scrupulously take care not to become involved in political issues," in the context of the congressional and executive examples previously mentioned, precedent has been set by representatives of the National Spiritual Assembly of the United States during several meetings with members of Congress and the president, between May 1982 and December 1985.

The friends in Bermuda were informed that "while we have sought support from governments of the free world on behalf of our Faith, we have never called for political demonstrations to bring pressure to bear on governments." This statement seems to presuppose at least two things. (1) The repeated examples of United States National Spiritual Assembly representatives interacting with congressional law-makers and with the highest officer of the executive branch of the nation, jointly "urging the adoption and supporting resolutions condemning Iran's continuing violations of human rights," was only an informal exercise which no one, including the friends, would or could view as involvement in politics. (Even though the carefully planned events were designed with specific political objectives in mind, such as to "bring

pressure to bear" on the Iranian government, as was stated by various members of the National Spiritual Assembly delegation.) Or (2) that the system in Iran does not technically constitute for Bahá'ís an accepted government, but that of South Africa, where 70 percent of the population — those native to the land — has no voice or vote, does in fact have a duly constituted republic.

Further, the statement seems to infer that the kinds of demonstrations of support we have made through Congress will be considered by the general citizenry to be less politically involved than, as an example, public demonstrations.

Our priority with respect to the friends in Iran is to stop the persecution and to allow Bahá'ís to worship free from fear. This goal will require actions on the part of the Iranian government, which will be political by definition. And this is obviously our objective and that of those countries of the "free world," however they may individually "bring pressure to bear."

The response statement from the Universal House of Justice, February 1986, to the National Spiritual Assembly of Canada states that "the racial situation in South Africa, and the spiritual challenges which it represents have now become intertwined with partisan political concerns." If one studies and knows South African history to any appreciable degree, it is easy to see that this has been the case from the beginning of the Republic of South Africa. It is partisan politics that the "union of South Africa's four provinces in 1910, was a union of white privilege and power for African subjection" [No Easy Walk to Freedom, Nelson Mandela]. Partisan political concerns regarding Africans have not just begun this year. Africans have struggled with them in South Africa for nearly a century; the institution of apartheid is their greatest foe.

The Universal House of Justice has told the friends of Bermuda "that as the policy of apartheid derives from racial discrimination, it cannot be accepted by Bahá'ís wherever, and in whatever form." That "friends should of course support the principles of the Faith," and "may associate with groups and engage in activities which promote these principles." Yet there is a great reluctance on the part of Bahá'ís to so much as whisper the words South Africa, and most avoid even voicing opinions about the Philippines, the Middle East, Central America, or Ireland — all places where human rights violations are continuing to occur daily. The ambiguity of what is political involvement is again, perhaps, the greatest obstacle to a Bahá'í contribution within the context of our principles.

It appears that, if Bahá'ís think an issue, any issue, to be political, without any investigation it is deemed to be so. Therefore, we continue to be uninformed about many pressing human rights problems and social questions.

Is there any area of society that does not involve, at least in some way, politics? I believe this to be a valid question that could generate long, intense discussion. While one may spend time in useless debate over what areas constitute involvement in politics, human rights violations — born out of

superiority attitudes, prejudices of all kinds, and a lack of equity and justice — continue to be the norm. As Father Daniel Berrigan so aptly described it, we live in a world of “pseudo-normalcy.”

In Iran, the issue of human rights supersedes our fear of political involvement. (How can they be separated?) Shouldn’t human rights supersede political concerns elsewhere? Apartheid is in the first instance a human rights issue, not a political one. In this sense it would seem not to be a question of being identified “with one or another side in a political dispute,” leaving “no alternative but to abstain.” Such a position only solidifies a general paralysis of will to act, even within the context of the principles of the Faith, which is all that friends such as myself seek to do.

As I seek a greater understanding, I also appeal to the highest Bahá'í institutions to give more guidance and direction with respect to human rights, social justice, and change to all Bahá'í communities. Communication to a specific National Spiritual Assembly may never be shared with some others, even though they may have similar interests and concerns — as is the case with the issue of apartheid.

For purposes of understanding, in the apartheid issue it is important to appreciate that black people have had to endure condescending attitudes reflected in the notion that they cannot assume high levels of responsibility or solve problems unless they are trained by whites. This should, at last, be put to rest.

Further, I believe this attitude perpetuates a belief in a Western European world-approach which reigns supreme as regards the importance of the freedom, dignity, and basic human rights of black people in particular, and people of color in general. As a result, the deprivation of those rights and freedoms always assumes a low priority, masked more often than not in a sea of excuses as to why they should not or cannot be addressed during a given time period (now is not the time, you’re moving too fast, etc.).

Imprisoned leader Nelson Mandela has told us that black South Africans have had to come to “grips with the harsh realities of the African struggle against the most powerful adversary in Africa: a highly industrialized, well armed State, manned by a fanatical group of white men determined to defend their privilege and their prejudice, and aided by the complicity of American, British, West German, and Japanese investment (10 percent greater return than normal) in the most profitable system of oppression on the continent.” That “baneful and persistent evil” (racism) is ever-present in the apartheid system, and most certainly is a human rights question that should be addressed in some way by Bahá'ís — along with Nicaragua, Afghanistan, and other places where conditions are at odds with the principles of our Faith.

This issue is not one of contravention against apartheid, but rather of supporting justice and human rights around the globe. I believe Bahá'ís should advocate such a position. We are of the world, not unto ourselves and apart from it. The True Exemplar has given us the example, as is pointed out in

the first issue of Dialogue, citing His boycotting of a company that practiced discrimination and calling on transportation companies to “refrain from transporting war ammunition…from one country to another.”

As a Bahá'í interested in teaching and promoting the Faith, particularly in the black community, where there has been little effort made in many areas, the importance of the issue of apartheid specifically — and human rights in general — is obvious. With utmost respect for the institutions of the Faith, I offer these comments, seeking only a deepened understanding for the purpose of facilitating those teaching efforts in accordance with Bahá'í principles and the instructions of Bahá'í institutions.

Jihmye Colllins
San Diego, CA

A problem with contemporary politics is that none of the parties concerned are prepared to follow any argument further than their self-interests permit them. Those relieving their consciences by promoting the disinvestment from South Africa campaign fail to appreciate the implications of their suggestions.

While the politicians of the day lead the world into greater turmoil, the Bahá'í society need do no more than declare its prime objectives. Transcending the expediencies of a moribund society will assist the Bahá'í world in its endeavour to expose the root of the problem, and will avoid the possibility of the Faith being misrepresented in an unfavourable manner. Bahá'í involvement in the rhetorical debates is simply a sententious alternative to assisting those forces currently encouraging racial interaction and understanding. Philanthropic morals are themselves incapable of being influential. Positive action supported by moral ethics is required to create an atmosphere of cooperation. In the South African context it is the foreign companies which are having a progressive influence in the field of labour relations and thus in the process of political evolution. These companies are gradually realizing the role they can play in developing a meaningful relationship between capital and labour. It is the American companies in particular which are operating according to a specified code of conduct. Their presence alone provides an example to local businesses, which are beginning to adopt a similar stance towards their employees and the society at large.

Technically, the only arena currently open for interaction between the races is in the field of labour. All educational and social activities are segregated economically, if not racially. Should those companies which operate within the framework of the Sullivan code withdraw from South Africa, the replacement capital managed by conservative local interests would be unlikely to further the principles of that code. If divest, then what medium is available for concerned organizations and institutions to promote equality other than through the states’ bureaucracy which in retaliation would be unwilling to cooperate.

Transferring ownership of South African assets held in the United States to those institutions lacking in social morals does little to remedy the situation. Placing those funds at the disposal of an organization concerned

with the development and education of the underprivileged would be a truly commendable action. Aiding humanity's struggle for existence through a process of cooperation, encouragement and support, is of concern to the Bahá'í world; hastening the expiry of an effete and tainted ideology is not.

Paul Caprez
Cape Town, South Africa

I would like to comment on the dialogue between Anthony A. Lee and Brent Poirier regarding the involvement of Bahá'ís in political action. I think it is clear from the two letters in your second issue, and from the various passages they quote from the Writings, that this is an area subject to judgment, interpretation, and evolution over time.

For the rest of our lifetime we will witness social and political causes or movements that represent principles of the Bahá'í Faith, and we will be pressed to consider our position or involvement in these movements. The letters of Mr. Lee and Mr. Poirier may be viewed as advocating "liberal" and "conservative" views on this subject. A cautious (conservative) or less cautious (liberal) view of the matter is only one dimension of this issue. It is the current nature of the social and political debate to employ this continuum for analysis of courses of action. I would suggest that the exclusive use of this continuum is, in itself, one of the current social and political problems.

In a discussion of Bahá'í involvement or participation in politics I would like to suggest that there are two other dimensions which should be considered. There is a dimension of locus of responsibility: who should decide on involvement? The argument that the Universal House of Justice alone should make such judgment is one of the continuum, and the argument that such decisions may be made by the individual alone represents the other end. Another dimension is what I would regard as the strategic versus tactical nature of the issue: principle or practice. Finally, I would like to comment on the spirit of the Bahá'í community in relation to political concerns.

Locus of responsibility: who should decide on involvement? Mr. Lee cites the recent involvement of National Assemblies in lobbying for efforts to obtain resolutions condemning the persecutions in Iran and the recent letter writing campaign in support of the United Nations Convention on Genocide. These are two clear examples of Bahá'í efforts to obtain political action and these efforts, therefore, may be viewed as political. Does this mean, then, that it is proper for an individual or a Local Spiritual Assembly to organize a Bahá'í effort to have resolutions passed in legislatures concerning the persecutions and genocide in Afghanistan by the Soviet Union? It is arguable that the same broad principles of human rights are involved. If not, why not?

If we feel more free to become involved in social and political causes, this is exactly the type of issue that will arise. I think it is important to realize that it is for the resolution of such questions that we have been given the institutions of the Faith. All of the examples cited by Mr. Lee, which he cited

as representing a new and more liberal course, were decisions by either the Universal House of Justice or the National Spiritual Assembly. The worldwide lobbying effort regarding political action directed at Iran has been directly orchestrated by the Universal House of Justice. The campaign to support passages in the United States Senate of the Genocide Convention was a decision of the National Spiritual Assembly. I think it is worthy of note that one issue was an international matter and involvement was decided by the Universal House of Justice. The other was a matter regarding the U.S. Senate and was initiated by the U.S. National Spiritual Assembly. Both decisions were made in consultation, by the elected and responsible institution, at a level of responsibility that was related to the level of the political concern.

Does this mean that every decision to become involved in a political cause must be made at this level? I do not think so. There may be social or political involvement that is appropriately decided at a local level. For example, an LSA might decide to take a position by a city council regarding fair housing, educational funding, and so on.

The point I am making is that we must recognize that while we may take certain political positions, we should do so in consultation with our institutions and our institutions must be certain that they are making decisions within an area for which they have full responsibility. There is appropriate concern that an LSA, for example, does not organize a demonstration against genocide in Afghanistan when that action might have far-reaching consequences to Bahá'ís in Afghanistan that the LSA could not possibly foresee. There is a continuum of locus of responsibility in the Faith, and it is the Assemblies who must consult and be both courageous and cautious in their actions.

Another issue which Bahá'ís should address in considering political involvement is the strategic (principle) or tactical (practice) focus of the involvement. The support of the Genocide Convention is an excellent example of a strategic issue that is entirely consistent with Bahá'í principles. Of course the Faith is against genocide and in support of fundamental human rights. There is little room for argument or misunderstanding on this issue. The support of the Genocide Convention is entirely different in character than supporting disinvestment in South Africa, for example. The support of the disinvestment movement is one of tactics, practices, not principle.

It should be noted that in our world political system this distinction is intentionally blurred. It is a basic tactic of partisan politics to claim ownership to high principle when advocating any position and to present the image that your adversary is against the principle rather than against your specific tactic. The advocates of disinvestment will argue for their action based on the principle of human rights, creating the impression that if you are against disinvestment you are against human rights. This political tactic is how partisan politics creates division and why it is dangerous. It should be noted also that this same process of attaching principle to practice is the process that has led to divisions within religions. If you examine the continual splitting of the Christian Faith into different denominations, you

will see that one group, in support of one practice, claimed that that practice represented a larger principle and others not accepting that practice were in contradiction to the principle.

The South Africa situation is an excellent example of the difficulty with Bahá'ís coming out in support of specific tactics. All Bahá'ís and, I am sure, most Americans are against the system of apartheid, the racism, and all the violations of human rights which that system represents. For Bahá'ís to take a position against apartheid and violations of human rights is one thing. To publicly support disinvestment is a position of an entirely different character. Disinvestment is one tactic to achieve the larger strategy or principle. It is quite easy to argue that U.S. corporations, adhering to the Sullivan Principles which require standards of hiring, promotion, etc., essentially similar to those in the U.S., are serving as a force for positive change. It may further be argued that if the consequences of closing contacts with liberal organizations (which IBM is in South Africa) are thought through to their conclusion, such a policy may lead to civil war in that country. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá specifically stated that “the Bahá'ís must not engage in political movements which lead to sedition” [The Promulgation of Universal Peace, p. 238]. It is our government’s official position that disinvestment will lead to sedition in South Africa.

I am not attempting to argue for or against the disinvestment movement. I am simply trying to point out that the single tactic of disinvestment does not have exclusive ownership of moral principle. It would, therefore, seem to me to be unwise for any institution of our Faith, or individual giving the impression of representing a Bahá'í view, to come out in support of or be associated with disinvestment. The cost of the potential disunity and misunderstanding would be greater than the benefit of “appearing” to be in the forefront of a liberal cause. We have a much more powerful solution to the problems of South Africa, and that solution is the total revolution in the character of society advocated in the Bahá'í Writings. Why position ourselves behind a minor tactic when we should be arguing for a much more bold, radical, revolutionary position which the total Bahá'í system represents?

I am impressed that each example of involvement in political action cited in the previous letters represented a support of basic principle, a strategy, not support of one particular tactic or practice. I believe it will be very easy for Bahá'ís to fail to make the distinction between support of broad principles and the support of specific tactics. It should be noted that most partisan political debates are over tactics, not strategies. If we are to obey the Guardian in his admonition to avoid “any form of activity that might be interpreted, either directly or indirectly, as an interference in the political affairs of any particular government” [Letter of March 21, 1932, The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh, pp. 63-64], we will have to be certain that our positions are in support of principles, not debatable tactics.

I suspect that some will ask the question “What happens when 40 or 50 percent of the population are Bahá'í? Are we still then to come out only in support

of broad principles?" I am sure that when this glorious day arrives we will become increasingly specific in our support of governmental action. However, the more the decision represents a specific practice, rather than support of a broad principle, the more that decision logically requires consultation. Decisions regarding support for specific practices — whether that decision is a specific policy or action of a local school board or the matter of disinvestment in South Africa — are the responsibility of the institutions of the Faith at the appropriate level.

There is another issue that is, I feel, at the heart of the matter of political involvement discussed in the previous letters and in the book Circle of Unity. Many of us, including most of the authors of the chapters in Circle of Unity, became Bahá'ís during the 1960s when social/political activism and a "revolutionary" spirit were strong motivating forces. We became Bahá'ís not only because we believed in the Manifestation of God for this age, but because we believed that the Bahá'í Faith was the most complete and effective revolutionary movement of all. What many of us now find lacking in the Bahá'í community has nothing to do with intellectual or rational arguments, but with that entirely irrational and seductive spirit of revolution that we savored during those days. This was closely connected with our own motivations, and we now are puzzled by our own feelings about the Bahá'í community and our own involvement.

In the Introduction to Circle of Unity Anthony Lee states that, "While the message of the Faith is still vital and progressive, our approach to current issues has become rather outmoded. The familiar twelve Bahá'í principles are still universal, but to the sophisticated reader the list today appears more a register of platitudes than a progressive social program." I believe that the twelve principles, if understood as described by the Guardian in The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh, represent the single most revolutionary movement on the planet. Every other movement, whether regarding changes in economic systems, racial policies, or education, are all "conservative" when compared to the revolutionary claims and specific plan of the Faith.

What is absent and desperately needed with the Bahá'í community is not a new list of principles or any specific program but, more importantly, an understanding and excitement about the truly revolutionary character of the Faith and the world order. The problem is the character of our spirit and our rhetoric. We talk about the Faith and its plan as if it were just another middle-class movement or Christian denomination. I found it interesting that Mr. Lee dedicated his book to Glenford E. Mitchell, "who inspired a generation of Bahá'í youth with a new vision of social action." My recollection of Glenford Mitchell's inspiration was an understanding of the revolutionary character of the Faith. he communicated to the Bahá'í youth of that time that it was the world order of Bahá'u'lláh that was the truly revolutionary force which made every other movement conservative in comparison. It is that understanding and spirit to which we must return.

I hope that my comments are not interpreted as arguments for a

“conservative” or a “liberal” stance on political participation. I believe that our effectiveness in becoming more active in social, economic, and political matters will be directly related to the effectiveness of our process of deliberation and our spirit, not whether we are liberal or conservative.

Lawrence M. Miller
Atlanta, GA.

"Campaign Launched to Free Imprisoned South African Children," from dialogue 1:4, p. 47 (1987)

The South African government’s imprisonment and torture of black children has become the focus of increasing international protest against the apartheid regime. A special children’s conference in Harare, Zimbabwe and a summer U.S. tour by four exiled southern African women have helped raise awareness of the continuing violation of human rights in South Africa.

Mojaki Thulo and Thuthukile Rabebe of South Africa and Loide Shinavane and Inge Zaamwani of Namibia toured the U.S. during the summer, calling on Americans to “adopt” an imprisoned South African child by writing to President Botha asking that the child be released from prison. At a Los Angeles presentation of their message, Rabebe described how children have been taken away from their homes and family in the middle of the night by armed police. Parents are not told of where their children are being taken or what crime they are being charged.

The South African Detainees’ Parents Support Committee and other civil rights groups have reported that thousands of children have been tortured, some as young as 5 years old. It is estimated that up to 40 percent of the over 25,000 persons detained under the state of emergency imposed June 12, 1986 are children under 18 years old. The International Commission of Jurists released a report in March 1987 that states that “children are being subjected to widespread physical abuse and torture by the [South African] security forces.” Young people have reported being beaten, raped, burned, given electric shocks, and often denied food and medical care, according to a study on the treatment of detainees by the National Medical and Dental Association of South Africa.

In Harare, a conference was held in late September to draw international attention to the situation and force the government to release all children from prison.

Young victims of the emergency detention laws spoke to the conference participants. Nthabiseng Mabisa, 13, is now paralyzed from the waist down. She described how she had been shot in the stomach and then in the back by South African soldiers. Buras Nhalathi, 17, recounted being tied to a pole with bright lights shined in his eyes during prolonged interrogation. William Modibedi, 11, was detained for two months and had difficulty describing the horrors of his incarceration.

“A South Africa that is prepared to use its military and paramilitary might

against children is a state that should be outlawed," Anglican Archbishop Trevor Huddleston said at that conference.

"The issue of children's rights is the most effective way of bringing home to the world the impact of apartheid on South Africa's future," Huddleston said. "Children's rights is something that none dare say is wrong. No one can say that the torture of children is excusable."

The conference's campaign to protect children in South Africa will be aimed not only at ensuring their rights but also at increasing international pressure on the country's white-led minority government to end apartheid and accept a political system based on one person, one vote.

At the close of the conference, a declaration was issued by participants which stated that "The deliberate and systematic targeting of children by the armed agents of the regime puts apartheid South Africa beyond the pale of civilized society. It exposes the political and moral bankruptcy of a system bent on destroying any form of opposition. Such a form of government is totally illegitimate."

The American, British, and West German governments, which have opposed sanctions on South Africa as hindering reform there, would be the principal targets of the new campaign.

The South African government has recognized its vulnerability on this issue. In recent months it has released all but 115 of an estimated 10,000 youths under 18 years old who have been detained without charge under the state of emergency. However, the Detainees' Parents Support Committee, which monitors detentions under South Africa's security laws, estimates that about 400 of the 1,800 people still being held without charge are under the age of 18.

A government spokesman dismissed the conferences charges in advance as "wild claims" and accused civil rights groups monitoring the detentions of "serving the enemies of South Africa." The government began releasing children last April when the conference was first announced.

Prepared by Steven Scholl based on reports inThe Los Angeles Times and the Women for Racial and Economic Equality Review.

click for larger image

click for larger image

click for larger image

click for larger image

click for larger image

click for larger image

click for larger image

Response by Steve Scholl, in Dialogue 1:3, pp. 4-5 (1986)

click for larger image

click for larger image

Letters to the editor, in Dialogue 1:2, p. 6 (1986)

click for larger image

Response by Drew Remignanti, in Dialogue 1:3, p. 7 (1986)

click for larger image

More responses, from dialogue 1:3 pp. 32-34 (1986)

click for larger image

click for larger image

click for larger image

click for larger image

click for larger image

"Campaign Launched to Free Imprisoned South African Children," from dialogue 1:4, p. 47 (1987)

click for larger image

METADATA

Views11766 views since posted 2012-01-20; last edit 2024-11-10 13:05 UTC;

previous at archive.org.../nirou_divestment_south_africa
Language
English
Permission
editor and publisher
History
Typed 2012-06 by Bobbi Lyons; Formatted 2013-01-18 by Jonah Winters.
Share

Shortlink: bahai-library.com/1888
Citation: ris/1888

select Collection:
Archives
Articles
Articles-unpublished
Audio
Bibliographies
BIC
Biographies
Books
Chronologies
Compilations

Compilations-NSA
Compilations-personal
Documents
East-asia
Encyclopedia
Essays
Etc
Excerpts
Fiction
Glossaries
Guardian
Histories
Introductory
Letters
Maps
Music
Newspapers
NSA-documents
NSA-letters
Personal
Pilgrims
Poetry
Presentations
Resources
Reviews
Scripts
Software
Statistics
Study
Talks
Theses
Transcripts
Translations
UHJ-documents
UHJ-letters
Video
Visual
Writings

home

sitemap

series

chronology

search:
author

— Disinvestment: Is It a Baha'i Issue? (Used by permission of the curator)