

World & Nation

South Africa's bishops protest new round of restrictions

Johannesburg, South Africa (NC) — With an unprecedented public demonstration on the steps of Johannesburg's Catholic cathedral March 11, a group of South African bishops escalated their protests of the government's ban on anti-apartheid organizations and the its threat to suspend publication of the bishops' newspaper

Four archbishops and four bishops, including the acting president of the southern African bishops' conference, took turns on the church steps holding placards demanding "Free the New Nation" and "Restore Our Human Rights." The protest followed a press conference in which the bishops called the government bannings unjust and apartheid "immoral and inhuman."

Participating in the demonstration and signing the letter were Archbishop Denis E. Hurley of Durban, Peter J. Butelezi of Bloemfontein, George F. Daniel of Pretoria and Stephen Naidoo of Cape Town, plus Bishops Reginald J. Orsmond of Johannesburg, conference acting president, Johannes L.B. Brenninkmeijer of Kroonstad and Michael M. O'Shea of Ingwauuma and Auxiliary Bishop Zithulele P. Mvemve of Johannesburg.

As of March 14 the government had made no response to the protest.

On February 25 the government banned the activities of 18 anti-apartheid groups, including United Democratic Front, the umbrella organization for anti-apartheid protest. It has also threatened to suspend New Nation, the secular newspaper owned by the bishops' conference, because of stories it has published about the racial conflict and government policy in South Africa.

"The Church views the restrictions" on the organizations and on several individuals

"with indignation," the bishops said in a statement delivered in the form of a pastoral letter to South African Catholics "and all people of good will." It said the government's actions have heightened tension and raised the "degree of oppression" in South Africa.

Anti-apartheid organizations have the right to "work for the common good, to develop democracy, to help those in need, to support the families of detainees and to dissent from political decisions which crush legitimate alternatives allowed in civilized societies," the bishops said. They urged the government to lift the restrictions.

They also said apartheid — South Africa's policy of racial separation which, among other rules, bars non-whites from voting in national elections and assigns residential

districts by race — "destroys human dignity" and "cruelly divides communities."

Apartheid "has been judged immoral and inhuman by the international community," the bishops said.

They said the Church is "not supporting any political party" but has a "divine duty to involve itself in human affairs" by safeguarding human rights. They quoted Pope John Paul II's speech to the southern African bishops last November in which he praised them for spreading the Gospel and upholding rights.

The bishops noted they are "pastors of a Church which represents approximately 10 percent" of the 33.2 million population.

The bishops also protested proposed legislation that would allow the government to decide which organizations would be allowed

to receive financial and other help from groups outside the country. The proposal is widely seen as an effort to cripple Church groups involved in anti-apartheid work.

The legislation, titled "The Promotion of Orderly Internal Politics Bill," would give the government authority "to decide arbitrarily which good works should be done in this country and which should not."

Regarding New Nation, the bishops said "while we may not necessarily agree" with some of its editorial stands "we uphold fully the right to editorial freedom and the right to dissent which that newspaper embodies."

They described the newspaper as a secular weekly that "carries news and views which other newspapers tend not to publish in the present climate of punitive restrictions."

NCCB president urges president to sign rights bill

Washington (NC) — The president of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops warned President Reagan that church and other institutions may be forced to cooperate in abortions if Reagan vetoes the Civil Rights Restoration Act.

In a letter released March 9, the NCCB president, Archbishop John L. May of St. Louis, urged Reagan to sign the legislation. Reagan has promised to veto the civil rights bill on the grounds that it threatens religious liberties and business interests.

The measure passed the Senate January 28 and the House of Representatives March 2. It languished in Congress for several years in a fight over abortion rights and church-state objections by some religious groups.

The act would overturn the 1984 Supreme

Court ruling in the Grove City College case. The court had ruled that only the federally funded programs of such institutions as universities, not the entire institutions, could be penalized for civil-rights violations.

Archbishop May said Congress made several "essential improvements" in the original bill, including an "abortion-neutral" amendment that specifies that nothing in the legislation "shall be construed to require or prohibit any person, or public or private entity, to provide or pay for any benefit or service, including the use of facilities, related to abortion."

He said the bill as enacted by Congress also "adequately accommodates legitimate concerns in the area of religious liberty."

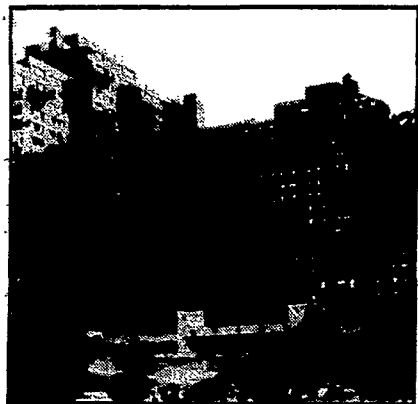
Archbishop May said if the bill is not signed by Reagan "these important guarantees will be lost and the existing regulations under Title IX will once again threaten to force institutional cooperation with abortion."

"We believe the Civil Rights Restoration Act with the important improvements made by the Congress is a significant victory for civil rights and an important step forward in insuring that our nation's civil rights laws do not violate fundamental convictions on human life," Archbishop May wrote.

He said the legislation "will strengthen the federal commitment to combat discrimination based on race, gender, age, ethnicity and handicapping condition."

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