

Amid promised reforms in South Africa,

Bishops demand racial equality

WASHINGTON (CNS) — The bishops of South Africa welcomed the Feb. 2 announcement by the nation's president, Frederick W. de Klerk, that the African National Congress would be granted legal status, but said the government still falls short on committing itself to racial equality.

On Jan. 31, the bishops had urged an end to the nation's death penalty and a moratorium on executions. They said the employment of the capital punishment is racially motivated and has been used as a weapon against the anti-apartheid movement.

And on Jan. 29, police in the city of

Bloemfontein used tear gas in a Catholic church hall to break up a meeting at which organizers were planning protests of a British soccer team's South African tour.

Commenting on the announcement of the legalization of the African National Congress, bishops' conference president Bishop Wilfred Napier of Kokstad, South Africa, said the move was welcome.

But he added, "I did not hear President de Klerk make a firm commitment to a new constitution on the basis of full equality for everyone."

"There can be no group rights or any distinction made on the basis of color" in a new constitution, Bishop Napier said.

De Klerk brought a package of reforms to the opening of parliament. He spoke of an open agenda with "overall aims" including a "new constitution" and "universal franchise."

He also said the government would soon decide the release date for long-imprisoned African National Congress leader Nelson Mandela.

Along with the lifting of the ban, exiled members of the newly legalized organizations will be allowed to return to South Africa, political prisoners will be released, and restrictions on 38 anti-apartheid organizations and on those recently released from politically motivated detention will be lifted. The longstanding state of emergency, which gives police vast powers of arrest and detention, is to be terminated as soon as possible, the president said.

In addition, de Klerk announced a moratorium on the death penalty.

Three days before the announcement, the bishops publicly demanded — for the first time — an end to capital punishment.

At the close of the bishops' Jan. 31 meeting, Bishop Reginald Orsmond of Johannesburg, vice president of the conference, said that a "growing awareness that capital punishment was unjust" had been heightened in South Africa by "the realization that the death penalty was fraught with racial discrimination and used as an instrument to eliminate those fighting the evil of apartheid."

He said the death sentence is "more the symbol of an unjust and uncaring social order than a remedy restoring justice and peace to society. In this it clearly contradicts all that Jesus lived and died for."

Amnesty International reported that 117 people were executed in South Africa in 1988. Further executions are believed to have been carried out in the "nominally



Archbishop Tutu addresses a rally.

independent African 'homelands,'" created by South Africa, the rights organization said.

The bishops' conference urged that a commission be appointed to look into all aspects of the death penalty and examine its relation to widespread violence in South African society.

Bishop Orsmond said the conference urged Catholics to pray for condemned prisoners and added that the church has been asked to cooperate in a nationwide, educational campaign on violence and capital punishment.

On another field of the South African political landscape, police firing tear gas dispersed 1,500 youths who met in a church hall in Bloemfontein to plan protests against a touring English cricket team.

The Jan. 29 incident was one of many as activists protested the team's seven-week tour, which had begun in spite of an anti-apartheid sports embargo against South Africa.

Father Leo D'Aes, a priest at St. Rose of Lima Church in the black township of Mangaung, outside Bloemfontein, said windows in the church hall were smashed as police broke up the meeting. Chairs were broken and benches were knocked over as people fled, the priest said.



Riot police chase a protestor in Mangaung, a South African township.

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