The Hartford Courant

A Message From Soweto: 'Keep the Pressure On'

H. Paul Santmire

As the debate about divestment continues around the country, I hear other voices. As students build shantytowns and stage sit-ins in administration buildings to persuade their colleges to divest from all companies that do business in South Africa, I recall other shantytowns and other demonstrations.

Last fall 16 other church people and I from all over the United States embarked on a three-week fact-finding tour of South Africa and South-West Africa, also known as Namibia. Our goal was to speak with Christians from all walks of life.

We raised the divestment issue and the related issue concerning U.S. sanctions against South Africa with people we met, especially with employed blacks, because they are the ones who presumably stand to suffer the most from sanctions and divestment.

These workers told us that the impact of U.S. economic disengagement will have, at most, marginal impact on black workers, because U.S. firms employ only 1 percent of the majority work force.

But that was not their chief concern. Even for the very few blacks who benefit appreciably from the economic system, they said it doesn't help to receive equitable pay, to have access to good health care, to enjoy company recreational facilities and to receive training for higher positions (such benefits are made available to them by some American firms that adhere to the so-called Sullivan Principles), if they have to return home to a Soweto at the end of the working day.

Soweto, an impoverished satellite city of 2 million people that is twice as large as the white capital Johannesburg, exists in a state of terror. Black employees told us how they could not be sure whether they will find their children alive when they return home each day. In Soweto, children are routinely brutalized, and not infrequently killed, by the army or police.

Nor can they be sure whether they or their loved ones might not be resettled, forcibly removed to one of the so-called homelands on any charge that the South African government might want to bring against them. In these homelands, they would almost certainly have no employment, no medical care to speak of, little food and definitely no hope for a better future.

We visited one resettlement area, Onverwacht, a city of 200,000 people, that is not on any map. People have been brought there from "black spots," where they may have lived and supported themselves adequately for generations. The city is a dumping ground in the middle of the arid, non-productive central region. Many of the people live in shanties, with no electricity or plumbing.

We saw few green plants in the region, and only a few scrawny animals. We learned that many of the children who live there

suffer from malnutrition; unemployment is rampant. Whole families try to survive on the meager pensions of a grandparent. A few families are supported by male heads-of-households who must live and work hundreds of miles away and who can only visit with their families two or three times a year. The medical needs of the city — which is twice as large as Hartford — are served by two doctors who are present only during the day.

The government plans to add 50,000 more uprooted blacks to this wasteland city. This is the standard operating procedure of the apartheid system. While the government may make highly-publicized gestures of reform — integrating a few beaches, allowing blacks and whites to marry, abrogating the hated passbook system — this genocidal resettlement policy continues. So does the rigid policy of residential segregation. No wonder that most black South Africans have greeted the termination of passbook regulations with suspicion or contempt.

Even though it might have cost them dearly, employed blacks, as well as the unemployed, urged us to keep the pressure on.

Their logic was both economically and ethically compelling. South Africa, they said, can only support the exorbitantly expensive apartheid system that effectively suppresses 26 million blacks and generously blesses 6 million whites with a sumptuous level of material prosperity, with the help of bank loans from abroad. The more Americans and Europeans can do, therefore, to undercut investor confidence in South Africa by working to destabilize the apartheid economy, the sooner the white minority regime will be forced to dismantle that abhorrent system.

Some blacks, to be sure, have taken a position against divestment and sanctions. But in one way or another most of them are in the pay of the government. Many of them stand to lose their positions of power and privilege when true democracy comes to South Africa. So of course they do not want to rock the boat too much at this time.

The white business people and professionals with whom we talked at various church gatherings, almost without exception, opposed divestment and sanctions. Such policies hurt blacks, they said. But these affluent whites characteristically spoke with little awareness of how radically their own economic self-interest and positions of political privilege shaped their reading of the situation.

There is no excuse for the Connecticut Legislature not to reconsider the tough divestment legislation that it rejected last week as a rider to a banking bill. Sponsors of the divestment bill may attempt to bring the legislation back on the floor before the session adjourns. Every responsible private and civic institution must also take corresponding action to bring its own portfolio into compliance with this decent, although surely not perfect, ethical strategy.

This strategy of divestment and sanctions may be the only peaceful policy left to people of good will in the United States that will allow us to make our influence felt in South Africa as that nation drifts more quickly toward chaos.

If we do not do everything we can to keep the pressure on the Pieter W. Botha regime to move beyond the highly publicized cosmetic reforms to the total abolition of this heinous institutionalized oppression, then the blood bath that many people fear will be unavoidable.

There is no time left for debate. If we talk these issues to death over here, death will surely triumph over there.

H. Paul Santmire is pastor of Grace Lutheran Church in Hartford.