

South Africa Hints At Conditional Release For Jailed Black Leaders

By ALAN COWELL

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CAPE TOWN, Jan. 31 — President P. W. Botha held out the possibility for the first time today of a conditional release for Nelson Mandela, the country's best-known black nationalist leader, who has been in jail for over two decades and who is regarded by many South African black people as their true leader.

There was no immediate response from Mr. Mandela, 66 years old, who is in Pollsmoor maximum-security prison in Cape Town, or from members of his family. Some South African commentators, however, said the purpose of Mr. Botha's offer seemed to be to shift responsibility for Mr. Mandela's continued incarceration away from the white authorities and onto the shoulders of Mr. Mandela himself.

Previously, Mr. Mandela, who was sentenced in 1964 to life imprisonment on charges of sabotage and plotting a violent revolution, has spurned offers of release in the nominally independent tribal homeland of the Transkei, which is reserved for people of Xhosa ethnic origin, like Mr. Mandela. He has not been offered release in those parts of South Africa deemed by the authorities to lie outside the tribal homelands.

In the white chamber of South Africa's new, three-chamber Parliament today, Mr. Botha said: "The government is not insensitive to the fact that Mr. Mandela and others have spent a very long time in prison, even though they were duly convicted in open court.

"The government is also willing to consider Mr. Mandela's release in the Republic of South Africa on condition that Mr. Mandela gives a commitment that he will not make himself guilty of planning, instigating or committing acts of violence for the furtherance of political objectives, but will conduct himself in such a way that he will not again have to be arrested."

"As I have indicated," Mr. Botha went on, "the government is willing to consider Mr. Mandela's release, but I am sure that Parliament will understand that we cannot do so if Mr. Mandela himself says that the moment he leaves prison he will continue with his commitment to violence."

“It is therefore not the South African government which now stands in the way of Mr. Mandela. It is he himself. The choice is his. All that is required of him is that he should unconditionally reject violence as a political instrument,” Mr. Botha said.

In a rare interview published in London on Sunday, Mr. Mandela was quoted as saying he would not accept any restrictions or conditions on his release. Moreover, he said, the limited guerrilla war being waged by his organization, the African National Congress, would continue until Mr. Botha’s government agreed to “legalize us, treat us like a political party and negotiate with us.” At that point, Mr. Mandela was quoted as saying, he was prepared to call a truce.

“The armed struggle was forced on us by the government and if they want us to give it up, the ball is in their court,” Mr. Mandela was quoted as saying in the interview. Mr. Botha did not address Mr. Mandela’s offer of a truce, and did not refer to the idea of legalizing the African National Congress, which the government has viewed for many years as its main armed opponent, and which is outlawed in South Africa.

There has recently been much speculation in South African newspapers that the authorities might talk with representatives of the African National Congress. Oliver Tambo, an exiled leader of the organization, said in an interview in Lusaka, Zambia, earlier this month that there could be no such discussions while Mr. Mandela and other nationalist figures were still in jail.

Mr. Mandela’s position was set out in an interview with Lord Bethell, a British member of the European Parliament. Access to Mr. Mandela is closely controlled, so the timing of Mr. Botha’s statement today seemed to hint at orchestration by the authorities of his comments and Mr. Botha’s response.

Mr. Botha said Lord Bethell’s report on Mr. Mandela’s prison conditions had “given the lie” to allegations that the nationalist leader was being mistreated.

There have been widespread calls for Mr. Mandela’s release both from black leaders inside this racially divided nation and from outside the country. From the authorities’ viewpoint, his unconditional release would galvanize black opposition to white minority rule and permit him to campaign for violent overthrow of the Pretoria government.

At the same time, a renunciation of violence from him, as the authorities are demanding, would greatly lower his standing among those of his followers who regard him as a figure untainted by compromise with the white authorities. Release on Mr. Botha’s terms would undermine Mr. Mandela’s influence unless accompanied by further concessions by the government on the acceptability of the African National Congress.

Some South African commentators suggested that Mr. Botha was maneuvering for position rather than embarking on a process of public negotiation between his

government and the imprisoned nationalist.