

DAKAR DIALOGUE

There was sadness among those who travelled to Dakar, at having to journey from the southernmost part of Africa to its most westerly tip to engage in the simple process of dialogue between South Africans. The physical and political journeys covered by all participants to arrive at Dakar formed a symbol of the distance which White South Africa yet has to move to break out of the imprisoning structures of apartheid.

The dust is still settling around the Dakar conference, which took place from 9 to 12 July, and any cool assessment of its significance needs to be founded on as much information about what took place as is possible. Those who went to Dakar have an obligation to report back widely and what follows is one contribution to this process and focuses on the ANC policies outlined at the conference.

The 61 person group assembled by IDASA (the Institute for Democratic Alternatives in South Africa) to join in dialogue with African National Congress was a disparate one, whose full membership was not known to me or to most others prior to assembling in London. The press had considerable difficulty in labelling the group, at times referring to them inaccurately as Afrikaners (most were but many were not), or as liberals (many were but several were not) or as Whites (most were classified such, others were not), and this difficulty highlighted the diversity of the political beliefs and backgrounds of the members of the group. It is simplest to refer to them as the 'internal' group and to stress that its members were neither delegated, nor mandated, to represent any one but themselves. The group had few women in it, a weakness that was commented upon both within the group and by ANC members.

The ANC group, led by Thabo Mbeki, Director of Information, consisted of 17 persons delegated to represent the ANC. It included 5 persons from the National Executive Committee (Thabo Mbeki, Pallo Jordan, Mac Maharaj, Francis Melli and Aziz Pahad) and was drawn from ANC members working in Zambia, Scandinavia, England, Ireland, the United States and West Africa. The delegation included two women, both occupying important positions in the organization, as well as persons



Thabo Mbeki with members of the S.A. Group

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directly concerned with such areas as ANC youth affairs, with culture, publications and religion. Wholly unsurprisingly (except to some of my questioners on return home) their knowledge of contemporary events in South Africa was detailed and excellent, with at least one of their members having left South Africa only recently.

From the two groups two figures stood out – Thabo Mbeki and van Zyl Slabbert – for their keen intellects, finely honed political analyses and qualities of leadership. Within conference discussions, as well as outside, and particularly when responding to probing questions, Thabo Mbeki demonstrated an outstanding ability to lay bare and examine the heart of an issue. Assessed by any international standards his talents are impressive, as are his diplomatic and negotiating skills.

From arrival to departure all the South Africans were extended an almost embarrassingly warm welcome by the Senegalese government. The 'internal' group arrived to be met by the Chief of Protocol and ushered into the airport V.I.P. lounge, escorted by motorcycle outriders to the hotel and, later, with the ANC delegation were given receptions both at the Presidential Palace and the residence of the Minister of Education. Unobtrusive and efficient twenty-four hour security by the Senegalese police was provided to ensure the safety of both groups – an irony that did not go unnoticed by several South Africans. Few were untouched by the warmth of the reception from the Senegalese which illustrated both the

welcome that awaits a democratic South Africa from African states and their eagerness to help in any process that may contribute to the birth of a non-racial South Africa. Overshadowing the Senegalese welcome to the 'internal' group however, was the welcome to it by the ANC delegation, who awaited their arrival late at night at their shared hotel to greet their fellow South Africans, many of whom they had knowledge of but few of whom they had met.

The Conference

The conference itself was opened by President Abdou Diouf, in a ceremony addressed by Madame Mitterand, attended by Senegalese cabinet members, by diplomats, and by far too many television crews and lights for comfort in the hot and humid Dakar climate. Thabo Mbeki's address to the opening stressed that South Africans have to be their own liberators and that while the ANC was committed to the further escalation of both a political and a military attack on the apartheid state, that it was of vital importance that whites should abandon racism and move with a minimum delay, to helping establish a non-racial democracy in South Africa.

On return to the hotel, where the conference itself took place, four major agenda topics were agreed upon. Each was introduced by an 'internal' speaker and responded to by an ANC member. The 'internal' papers (by Andre du Toit, Lawrence Schlemmer, Leon Louw and Christo Nel) had previously been sent to the ANC and the responses to these, although delivered by individuals, represented the ANC position. The formal topic areas covered were four: (i) Strategies for bringing about fundamental change in South Africa, (ii) the problem of building national unity, (iii) perspectives on the structures of a government of a free South Africa, and (iv) the economy of a liberated South Africa.

These topics provided umbrellas for free-ranging discussions of many issues – the armed struggle, violence, negotiation, political pluralism and a Bill of Rights in a future South Africa, the future of the Afrikaans language and culture, the nature of the post-apartheid economy, the need for distributive justice, being among the many topics raised and examined in varying degrees of detail.

The first agenda topic led directly into a tough and frank discussion of the ANC's resolve to maintain and intensify the armed struggle. The 'internal' group expressed deep reservations about this strategy, its impact on civilians, and the consequences of confronting the South African state on a terrain where it is at its strongest. In addition members of the group expressed their considerable concern at the uncontrolled political violence occurring inside South Africa. A probing debate ensued with the ANC delegation outlining the historical circumstances surrounding their 'painful decision' to engage in armed struggle, that had been arrived at only after other strategies had failed to rid South Africa of racial oppression. The ANC delegation stressed that the armed struggle was only one of four major parts of their strategy, the other three parts involved internal mass mobilization, international mobilization to isolate the regime and the building of liberation structures within South Africa. Their view was that the seriousness of the South African situation meant that on all fronts their struggle against the

apartheid regime must escalate further and escalate not merely in the area of armed struggle. The ANC emphasised that they were very occupied with the issue of indiscriminate political violence, and that it had always been their position that every act of the armed struggle should have a clear objective for it made no sense in any arena to use violence indiscriminately. They noted that with the expansion of the armed struggle, involving internal recruits less prepared and over whom they did not have close control, more possibilities existed that mistakes could occur but it remained their policy not to attack soft targets. The point was made in several forms by the ANC that it was no use blaming the victims of apartheid for engaging in an armed struggle, when the source of violence derived from the fact that the use of force is fundamental to the daily existence of racial domination.

The lengthy discussions on this topic provided the backdrop to discussion of the importance of a negotiated resolution to the South African conflict. All participants were agreed that a negotiated settlement was desirable and that progress toward this was being blocked by Pretoria. It was clear from the discussions that the ANC has never removed from its vision the possibility of a negotiated settlement. However, the ANC position was that negotiations were not possible until all political prisoners had been released, organisations unbanned, only then could questions about negotiations themselves be addressed and considered. The ANC delegation indicated that the release of Nelson Mandela could help unlock the political process toward negotiations. In 1985 they had received a message that the State might be prepared to release political prisoners, including Nelson Mandela, but that it was worried about the potential violence that may follow these releases. The ANC then had suggested that a small delegation from their National Executive go to South Africa to talk to political prisoners and popular organisations – but there was no response from the State to their efforts to assist in achieving this vital precondition for negotiations. Their view was that the State was not willing to negotiate and that this was directly responsible for the intensification of the armed struggle. The ANC also made it clear that the shape of a future negotiation table would be two sided – on one side would be the Forces of Democracy, and would include such organisations as the UDF, COSATU and religious groups and on the other side would be racists. It was also pointed out that any demand for a moratorium on the armed struggle to enable negotiations to get underway faced the inherent danger of the State or 'vigilante groups' using armaments during such a moratorium with the specific aim of attempting to discredit the ANC. It was also noted by the ANC that negotiations concerning the Vietnam War had taken place during the war and prior to any cease fire. Nevertheless the ANC position was that a moratorium could be considered if serious negotiations were a real possibility and that these would produce a practical, real result that would be seen by the people of South Africa. On several occasions the ANC stressed their eagerness either to institute 'negotiations about negotiations' or to initiate the process toward negotiations and their sadness at the obstacles erected and maintained by the South African State that were preventing a negotiated solution to the existing conflict in South Africa.

The issue of political pluralism also was examined at some length in the discussions. The ANC made clear that as an organisation it had engaged in efforts to provide a broad front and to yoke a variety of democratic groups and organizations into the struggle. At one point it had been argued internally that no person who was a member of another political organisation could be a member of the ANC. This argument has been consistently rejected and the ANC stated that it had always resisted the temptation to become solely socialist or exclusive of liberals, for its concern is to encourage united action against apartheid. ANC delegates stressed that Congress was concerned with leadership against apartheid and not with the hegemony over all the forces opposing it. Consequently the ANC had participated in the formation of a range of different organisations acting against apartheid, had shared common trenches with different organisations, had developed a respect for them and that in a post-apartheid South Africa it would be unequivocally committed to political pluralism. It was pointed out by ANC members in discussions that the ANC itself in a future South Africa could dissolve into its constituent parts. What was made clear was that the ANC commitment to political pluralism would not be extended to advocates of racism and that a future South Africa would have a "liberatory intolerance" of racism and fascism, that will lead, as in other societies, to racism becoming a punishable offence.

In the context of this discussion the 'internal' group also raised the issue of a future Bill of Rights. The ANC position was that it had no problem with an entrenched Bill of Rights in a post-apartheid South Africa although a clear distinction would have to be drawn between rights and privileges. Basic human rights would be safeguarded, the rights of women would be protected, while privileges, such as the group areas act, would not. This discussion tied in with the concerns expressed by members of the 'internal' group concerning the safeguarding of the Afrikaans language and of Afrikaner cultural identity, and led to repeated assurances by the ANC that these would not be under threat in a new South Africa. The Afrikaans language was a language used and respected by millions of South Africans and the ANC had no desire to see this changed and wished to see people's cultural heritages protected.

Finally an important area of discussion should be briefly touched upon here – the structure of a post-apartheid economy. The ANC pointed out their desire to see a mixed economy existing in a future South Africa but with the State controlling the commanding heights of it. They viewed the severe imbalances of wealth and the maldistribution of economic resources as necessarily meaning that some programme of nationalization would be required to redress such imbalances. The ANC delegation did not believe that it would be either desirable or feasible for a new government to take over at 12 and to nationalise banks, mining houses at 12.30. They viewed such a perspective as extremely naive for there would

have to be intensive consultation among all forces of change, including some business groupings, before any programme of nationalization was instituted. It was emphasised by the ANC that they recognised that sanctions and the intensification of the struggle against apartheid would increase such immediate problems facing a future South Africa, as providing adequate health, housing and education for all citizens. However, they viewed this as a cost that had to be measured against the urgency of taking steps to excise apartheid from South Africa and deal with the damage that it was causing. It was evident from discussions that ANC economic policy is rooted in the Freedom Charter and that precise mechanisms for dealing with economic issues in a post-apartheid South Africa have yet to be decided. In this context an invitation was issued to South Africans to begin now to contribute to working out mechanisms which would address such issues as the redistribution of land.

While the items touched upon formed some of the main areas of discussion there were many other themes running through conference discussions. Thus, for instance, the KwaNatal Indaba was discussed and the reasons for the ANC rejection of it outlined (among these being that it could entrench further the fragmentation of South Africa; it deflected the struggle for liberation; it did not have the support of the UDF or any other widely based mass movement and it could lead to increased repression by the local state). It is obviously not possible in this report to do more than provide some broad brush-strokes of the contours of the ANC position on some of the topics raised. The positions outlined by the ANC were not new positions but it was scarcely to be expected of any 75 year old organisation that it should flip-flop and zig-zag by adopting new positions at any conference it participates in. What was important was that its positions were presented clearly to an 'internal' group of South Africans, were debated with them, both inside and outside of the conference room – over meals, around the swimming pool, while touring factories, during receptions, in hotel rooms – these debates cannot be immediately assessed, but without doubt the ANC listened carefully to the issues raised by the 'internal group' and will consider these in their internal deliberations. The 'internal group' came away with a far clearer understanding of the ANC position and with a fuller view of the nature of the South African conflict. All had been driven to Dakar by a desire for a peaceful solution to the South African question and came away with repeated assurances from the ANC of its resolve to work for a non-racial democracy that would be inclusive of White South Africans.

The conference ended at a formal session on Goree Island off the coast of Dakar, after a visit to the Slave House through which some 15 to 20 million people had passed en route to a life of slavery. The thought did not escape several that South Africa itself one day may have a monument to apartheid, but on an island off Cape Town. □