

Netherlands Institute for Southern Africa

Contribution of Sietse Bosgra,

I'm at this conference as a representative of the Netherlands Institute for Southern Africa, the organization that originated from a merger of the different Dutch solidarity organizations. But I will speak here on the basis of my own experiences. I was part of the history of the Dutch solidarity organizations with Southern Africa for more than 40 years.

Like in some other countries the solidarity movement for South Africa in the Netherlands started after the Sharpeville massacre in 1960. On the board of the South Africa Committee each political party had one representative, but as a consequence of the cold war the left wing parties were excluded

I was part of a broader movement, most of them students, in Amsterdam. We were critical of the role of our country in the world, the Dutch policy towards its former colony Indonesia, the Vietnam war, the freedom struggle of the Algerian people against French colonization. We did not feel at home in on the South Africa Committee, which excluded the left wing parties, and sent polite petitions to the South African embassy in the expectation that this would contribute to ending apartheid. Moreover, as leftwingers, we were not welcome at the South Africa Committee.

Then, in Angola, on the fourth of February 1961 the armed liberation struggle started. The Portuguese dictatorship, part of the so-called free world, used the arms it received as a member of the NATO alliance to suppress the revolt. Two months later the Angola Comite in Amsterdam was founded. We had learned from our activities for Algeria that it takes years to get the support of public opinion and of the politicians, so we felt we better start immediately. The Angola Committee became the support group of the liberation movements in all Portuguese colonies. For us this seemed the best way to contribute to the liberation of South Africa

Exactly ten year later we could prove we had that support when we started our first boycott campaign. The Netherlands imported more coffee from Angola than all other European countries taken together, with the exception of Portugal. Schools, universities, churches, city councils, all decided to boycott Angola coffee. Unrest among the soldiers in the Dutch army forced the minister of defence to promise them that they would in future drink Angola-free coffee. After six weeks all the coffee roasters gave in.

During all these years there was little reaction from the Angolan liberation movement MPLA. But the relations with the Mozambican movement Frelimo were frequent and excellent. They were the ones who taught us what our tasks were. During the first years of its existence, the activities of the committee were mainly activities and battles on the streets. Many of us were wounded by the police when we disrupted with hundreds of young people a Portuguese military band playing at the NATO tattoo in the Amsterdam Olympic stadium. The same happened when we occupied the Portuguese consulate to celebrate 40 years of Salazar dictatorship in Portugal.

But Frelimo totally changed our approach. They told us: “We are doing the fighting in Africa, that is none of your business. But there is a second front, in Europe, and that is your battlefield. Your task is to isolate the enemy and to organize in your country political and material support for the liberation movements.” They instructed us to build up contacts with the large political parties in parliament. At the start we were reluctant, as these parties had all supported the colonial war against Indonesia, but finally we agreed. We were to follow that line for 40 years.

Frelimo also had a practical task for us. In the Scandinavian countries they received government funds for their humanitarian work, and they thought the same should happen in the Netherlands. As the Angola Committee was at that time in a bitter fight with the government about the NATO arms deliveries to Portugal, it was decided to set up a separate organization to work for this demand, the Eduardo Mondlane Foundation. We succeeded in one year: Frelimo was the first liberation movement ever to receive Dutch government funds.

When we discuss the liberation of South Africa we should not forget that it was Frelimo that put the liberation struggle in Southern Africa on the agenda in a period that most attention went to the Vietnam war. That was not only the case in the Netherlands but if I'm right also in other European countries. Many young people saw in Mozambique a new part of the world liberated from capitalism, a second Cuba, and after the liberation hundreds of them went to Mozambique to help build up the new free society.

During all these years there was in the Netherlands little activity concerning South Africa and in support of ANC. The South Africa Committee of the 1960's could not keep up with the emerging radical course in Third World activism and was ineffective. However, in the early seventies a young South African, the Afrikaner Berend Schuitema, was able, with his friends, to take over the organization and reshape it into the Dutch Anti-Apartheid Movement. But they also focused their activities more on the liberation struggle in Rhodesia/Zimbabwe than on South Africa. These were the years of good cooperation between the both organizations. Many local groups were formed, and at the annual Southern Africa conferences there were up to 800 participants from all parts of the country.

After the liberation of the Portuguese colonies a rearrangement in the solidarity movement took place. The Angola Committee concluded that the enemy was no longer in Lisbon, but in Pretoria. At international conferences and during visits to Africa the members of the Angola Committee had often been in contact with ANC, Swapo, ZAPU/ZANU, who asked them to send part of the material support to them. During 1975 all our energy was put into supporting MPLA in its fight against South African aggression. But much of the goods that were sent to Angola were given to ANC and Swapo, who had now moved into Angola. The name of the organization was changed into Komitee Zuidelijk Afrika. But as the liberation movements used to speak about the “Holland Committee”, the English name became Holland Committee on Southern Africa”. The Mondlane Foundation, who had been responsible for the material aid to the

liberation movements in the Portuguese colonies, would in future be responsible for the Dutch support for these new states.

Discussions were started between the Holland Committee and the Anti Apartheid Movement (AAM) about cooperation or forming one new organization. Just in that period an important development took place in the AAM that ended the good relations. Together with Breyten Breytenbach, Berend Schuitema, the founder and leader of the AAM, had secretly founded a white liberation movement of South Africa, named Okhela, apparently with the support of Oliver Tambo. But for others in the London office of ANC this was unacceptable. With the support of London Schuitema was expelled from the AAM. He and other expelled board members in the AAM came to the Holland Committee wanting to join our organization, but we had to decline, although they were full of energy and had enormous capacities. We did not want to become part of the conflict.

When the dust had settled, the talks between both organizations were started again. The reborn AAM was oriented towards the Dutch Communist Party, a small isolated party with little political influence. This was conflicted with our policy to build up contacts with the larger political parties. Their message was that we should not campaign against Dutch firms to stop their collaboration with South Africa, as the ANC feared that the workers would be alienated from the freedom struggle. Instead we should campaign for 'total sanctions'. And we should not campaign for Dutch government support for the ANC, as such support would only be an excuse for the continuation of collaboration with the apartheid regime. Our position was that it was for the ANC to decide if they wanted Dutch government support.

The strange situation developed that both the Holland Committee and the Dutch AAM were support organizations of the ANC, but that each had its own contacts in the ANC office in London. For many in the ANC the Anti-Apartheid Movement were the comrades, we accepted that we were just friends. More painful was that during a visit to Luanda we were invited by Joe Slovo for a meeting. For us it was a kind of tribunal. In the presence of some twenty ANC cadres we had to answer questions full of distrust. We were seen as Labour Party people, and indeed we had succeeded in involving the party in supporting the liberation struggle in Southern Africa, as Frelimo had asked us. For instance the party would send letters to all its 100.000 members to ask for donations to the liberation movements in Southern Africa through our Liberation Fund.

The result was that the Netherlands had two large support organizations for the same liberation movements in Southern Africa. At the same time other smaller solidarity organizations were founded, Kairos, originally a support organization of Beyers Naudé's Christian Institute, was focused on the churches and their followers. The South African Esau du Plessis founded Boycott Outspan Action. These four organizations had their own activities, but worked together during the big campaigns. Three of them had a common monthly publication "Amandla", together with the North of Belgium where also Dutch is spoken. Also the Dutch Anti-Apartheid Movement was invited to join but they continued to publish their own periodical.

All four organizations received most of their funding for salaries and campaigning activities from the Dutch government. Like the other Dutch third world organizations. In this the Netherlands is probably an unique case. When we produced banners against the government policy or painted slogans on the walls, the costs were paid by the government. As our salaries were very modest, in all about 30 full-time people could work for the four anti-apartheid organizations.

In the practical work, the Holland Committee and the Dutch AAM had different fields of activities. The AAM was active on the issue of the arms trade and nuclear collaboration with apartheid. The main focus of the AAM through the years was however building up bonds of friendship with the ANC. The AAM did a great deal in the cultural field, linking the campaign for a cultural boycott of white South Africa with a plea for an 'alternative Cultural Treaty' with the resistance. Major AAM-organized festivals and conferences in Amsterdam included 'The Cultural Voice of the Resistance' in 1982 and 'Culture in Another South Africa' (or CASA) in 1987. Such events became important meeting-places for South African artists not only with their foreign colleagues, but with their exiled compatriots too. As worded by the ANC's Barbara Masekela at the 1987 CASA conference, during the years of apartheid Amsterdam had become "*the cultural capital of South Africa*" for South Africans. In this field of soft sanctions the government was willing to take certain steps. Subsidizing emigration to South Africa was stopped, the cultural treaty was suspended and years later terminated, sports contacts were reduced. Among the other AAM-supported campaigns were those for the ANC's Radio Freedom, for SOMAFCO, for the release of political prisoners, and those in the fields of women's rights – with the major 'Malibongwe' conference in Amsterdam in 1990 – and, later on, for the support of South African gay and lesbian organizations. Hidden from the public eye the AAM chairwoman, Conny Braam, was also involved in the ANC Operation Vula, on which she published a revealing book in 1992.

One of the most important activities of the Holland Committee was material aid for the ANC. When in 1975 the Dutch government stopped its support for MPLA, Frelimo and PAIGC, it started to extend the support to Swapo and ZAPU/ZANU. ANC was the last one and followed in 1976. The government support was in the form of goods to be sent to Africa. But a government bureaucracy is not equipped for buying rather small quantities of the many different products and shipping them to various places in Africa. At the request of all the liberation movements the government money was handed over to the Holland Committee. This made it possible to react immediately to requests by the liberation movements, and offer them unconditional support. At the end of the year the bills for humanitarian goods were sent to the government, whereas for instance nightglasses and communication equipment for the liberation armies were paid for by funds from the public. At the Committee six persons were working full-time in its department for material aid.

During these years the European Union was under great public pressure to institute sanctions against South Africa. Under this pressure the Union in 1986 started a 'special program for the victims of apartheid'. It would become the Union's largest aid

programme of any kind in history, and with its annual budget of nearly 100 million dollars it was also one of the largest support programs for the organizations inside South Africa working for change. The money was channelled through European NGOs. In South Africa there were four organizations to transfer the money: the Council of Churches, the Bishop Conference, the trade unions and the Kagiso Trust. As the Holland Committee already received the Dutch government funds for the liberation movements, it was the only European anti-apartheid organization accepted by the EU to be involved in the project. And as the ANC-oriented organizations in South Africa often preferred to work with a solidarity organization, the committee became one of the largest participants in the project.

Our biggest contribution to the liberation of South Africa was probably that, together with Beyers Naudé on the South African side, we were able to exclude Inkatha from these massive funds. Buthelezi had at that time a lot of support in the west. He was a personal friend of people like Thatcher, Reagan, the German chancellor Kohl. They hoped that after apartheid power would not be transferred to the communists, the ANC, but to Buthelezi. This would most probably mean a civil war in South Africa. The Holland Committee first set up a coordinating body for the European NGOs involved in the program, called SANAM, with the secretariat in the hands of the Holland committee. The next step was to develop, with Beyers, a ten-point Code of Conduct for the EU program. No money to activities that were normally funded by the South African government, no money to homeland institutions, no money to tribal organizations. Beyers convinced the four South African partners: they would stop their cooperation with the EU if they would not accept this Code of Conduct. Finally Beyers went to Brussels, where he told the European Union that he would organize a press conference in Brussels to announce the end of the program if the demands were not met. Although this is one of the most important contributions of Beyers Naudé to the liberation of South Africa, few people are aware of these facts.

Finally, I would like to say something about the economic sanction activities of the Holland Committee. One of our first victories was in 1985, when we forced the banks to stop selling the Krugerrand. It was rather symbolic, and probably that was the reason that the European Union shortly after our victory banned the sale of Krugerrands in all EU member states. With the support of the local groups and the trade unions we were in 1986 able to force all the Dutch shopping chains to stop selling any South African product till the end of apartheid.

But our biggest campaign was, together with Kairos, to force Shell to end fuelling apartheid. There were about 80 so-called anti-apartheid cities in the Netherlands, but the government prohibited them to boycott Shell. This campaign continued for more than ten years, without Shell giving in to our demands. Some of the activists became impatient. More and more petrol stations of Shell were attacked, the country house of an oil trader who was heavily involved in embargo busting was burned down, the Makro hypermarket was reduced to ashes. This brought us in a difficult position, we did not want to let these activists down as their aim was the same as ours, but on the other hand our strength was public sympathy for the cause, and we were afraid to lose it as a consequence of these violent activities. The ANC openly condemned these violent acts.

It seems that after an internal struggle the ANC gave up its initial resistance against the oil campaign of Kairos and the Holland Committee. An “oil unit” was formed under president Tambo in London. In close consultation with the ANC and the UN Centre against Apartheid, both Dutch organizations set up a new body with a neutral name: the Shipping Research Bureau and with a secret address in Amsterdam. For almost fifteen years three full-time researchers monitored the world-wide secret oil deliveries to South Africa. All the Arab states had promised to stop selling oil to South Africa, but the trade continued. Each time SRB discovered a secret delivery, both the UN Committee against Apartheid and ANC would approach the government of the country where the oil originated. The international oil embargo placed a enormous burden on the apartheid economy. The South African president P.W.Botha in the mid-eighties boasted that his government had already spent 22 billion rands to make sure the country got is oil. He did not realize that he was saying that the apartheid regime had wasted 22 million rands to meet the impact of the oil embargo.

Of course the oil embargo campaign of the Holland Committee and Kairos was also focused on the Dutch government. Holland does not produce oil itself, but the Rotterdam port is the major international centre for the oil trade, and South Africa got a sizeable part of its crude oil imports through Rotterdam. We wanted a ban on all oil exports to South Africa. In line with what Frelimo had learned us we needed now good contacts in the large Christian Democratic Party. Their parliamentary spokesman for foreign affairs, Jan Nico Scholten, became a personal friend. His baptism of fire was a dangerous visit to the liberated areas of Guinea-Bissau together with his Labour Party colleague. Since then every year I visited him in parliament to assist in preparing his speech for the debates on foreign affairs. He was able to organize majority support in parliament for a one-sided Dutch oil embargo against South Africa, after all other West European states had refused to join the Netherlands. However, the oil embargo debate ended in a disaster for him. The Dutch government refused to give in. If parliament insisted it would step down. An enormous pressure was thus put on the Christian Democratic parliamentarians by their CD government. Finally, in the middle of the night, Jan Nico Scholten lost his majority. The next step of the party was to deprive him as spokesman of foreign affairs. Jan Nico left the party and parliament, and devoted his energy to the struggle against apartheid through the organization he had founded, AWEPA, the Association of West European Parliamentarians against Apartheid. More than a thousand parliamentarians from all over Europe became member of his organization.

Finally, there came an end to apartheid. The Dutch AAM, the Holland Committee and the Mondlane Foundation formed a new organization, the Netherlands Institute for Southern Africa. It is a large organization, about 50 people are working there, and not on the low salaries we received during the anti-apartheid years but on pay conforming to the market sector. Also now the funds come from the Dutch government, the European Union, etc. By far most people working there have no connection with the times of the liberation struggle. I have a room in the office, but together with some other old friends of Holland Committee and Kairos we now work for the Palestinian people. My only task

connected with Southern Africa is trying to realise a project with the University of Amsterdam en the International Institute of Social History to record the history of the Dutch contribution to the liberation of South Africa.>

Sietse Bosgra

