

# FREE THE CH

charlene smith



In late October 1986, Gill de Vlieg and Aninka Claasens approached Transvaal regional chairperson Ethel Walt to suggest a campaign for the release of the hundreds of children believed to be in detention.

Figures were sketchy. Of the 22 000 people estimated at that time to have been detained under the State of Emergency proclaimed on 12 June 1986, at least 40% were thought to be children as defined by the Children's Act, that is, persons under the age of 18. Monitors believed that, of these 8 800 children, some 1 300 to 1 800 were still being detained. (The figure has risen sharply since then.)

Two weeks after the idea was mooted, and a small committee had been formed, a wide range of organisations and individuals was invited to a working meeting. Educators, doctors, lawyers, the clergy and social workers expressed their concern about the impact of detention on children, their families and the community at large. By December, 27 organisations, including partially state-funded bodies such as the Child Welfare Society were lending support to the campaign, and a 'Free the Children Alliance' had been formed.

At the November launch delegates heard the relatives of detained children describe their distress and helplessness when family members were seized. Matthew Molefe from Kagiso — the Witwatersrand township worst hit by child detentions — sobbed as he recounted his inability to protect his 13-year-old daughter, Happy Cleopatra, when

she was taken from the family home at 4 a.m. on 24 September.

A mother with two children in detention, aged 14 and 18, said, 'Whenever I try to eat, I cannot eat. I wonder if my children are eating. I can't sleep, because I don't know where my children are sleeping. We parents of detainees don't feel like people anymore, we feel worthless. I don't know if we'll run mad or die ... I keep writing letters to the police for permission to see my children, but I've received no replies'.

In a statement supporting the campaign, the National Medical and Dental Association warned that children who have been detained may develop bitterness, resentment and a thirst for revenge which propels them along pathways of future violence and abuse.

Experience bears out this frightening assessment. Audrey Coleman, a member both of the Black Sash and the Detainees' Parents Support Committee, told of some of the children she encounters daily in the Johannesburg office of the DPSC. Two little boys, aged 11, who had spent some weeks in detention before being charged with public violence, told her that they would stone the same government building 'tomorrow' if they had the opportunity.

Ethel Walt had the idea of Christmas cards to spread the 'Free the Children' message. The initial printing of 20 000 was snapped up within two days and the committee printed 50 000 more. Bumper and envelope stickers rolled off the presses too.

Prominent individuals here and abroad endorsed the campaign: Nadine Gordimer, Helen Suzman, Helen Joseph, Sydney Kentridge and others supported a public meeting in Johannesburg. 'Free the Children' campaigns were launched in France by Madame Mitterand and in Sweden by Mrs Lisbeth Palme.

Most important of all, every time the Alliance held a public meeting, parents of detainees gave their support — desperate for the campaign to succeed. Only die-hard conservatives appeared unable to identify with the tragedy of children in detention. As Ethel Walt observed, 'What kind of society needs to be protected from its own children? ... Only a government which can no longer govern normally because it does not enjoy the consent of the governed'.

On 10 December — Human Rights Day — about 400 parents of detainees crammed the Khotso House hall for a Christmas 'party'. The purpose was to celebrate the release of child detainees, if the government had found the compassion to free them; otherwise, to mourn and renew efforts on behalf of those who were detained.

The number of parents who attended was interesting in the light of the recent attempt by Commissioner of Police, General Johan Coetzee, to dispute figures compiled by detention monitoring groups. He and the Minister of Law and Order, Adriaan Vlok, had claimed that there are only 256

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*Behind the statistics is the child. Natal Coastal Region personalised the campaign: each balloon carries the name of a child in detention and the words 'Free this child'.*

children aged 11 to 15 years in detention nationwide. Their statement ignored the fact that in South Africa children are legally defined as those under 18, and that 16- and 17-year-olds tend to be the target group for detentions. There were about 400 parents of detained children from the Witwatersrand alone at the party, and by the end of the day we had 66 more names of detained children of whom the DPSC had been unaware.

A small glimmer of joy was the news that 21 children, ranging in age from 10 to 17, had been released. But when it appeared that little hope could be entertained that others would be freed, Sash members tried to deliver food and balloons to prisons where children were being held:

- Modder Bee prison on the East Rand
- Diepkloof prison, near Johannesburg
- Krugersdorp prison
- Westville prison, in Natal.

The 'Free the Children' campaign appears to have been of interest to officials whom we may not name. The home of Aninka Claasens was visited at midnight. So was the home of Gill de Vlieg. Gill had left, but a house-guest of hers was held for some hours and questioned — about the campaign, among other things.

As for me, a mother, I wonder why it seems such an impossible wish to want your children at your side, why it is such an impossible, subversive thing to want peace and brotherhood in South Africa. And I fear for all our children. □

