

frank chikane says

'use your space'

As the government increasingly blocks off avenues of non-violent resistance, those who still have 'political space' face the challenge of showing that non-violence can still deliver results. This is a grave responsibility, argues Frank Chikane, General Secretary of the South African Council of Churches, in his keynote address at the National Conference's public meeting. This is an extract from his speech.

Never have organisations working for human rights faced such obstacles in South Africa as they do now. On 24 February 1988, the Minister of Law and Order issued a proclamation prohibiting 17 organisations from undertaking 'any activities or acts' whatsoever, apart from routine administrative and book-keeping functions. All these organisations were involved in non-violent 'activities and acts' to protest against and resist apartheid, and to assist the victims of this system.

I submit that the Minister's proclamation is devastating for our country. For it effectively tells the oppressed majority: you cannot engage non-violently to end your oppression.

People often talk about the victims of apartheid resorting to violence. But the Minister's order makes it quite clear that the South African government has chosen the violent way of resolving our country's problems. The regime is saying: 'We in the government have opted for the battleground. Come and challenge us there.'

The Bill to curb foreign funding to anti-apartheid groups is a further indication of the government's determination to undermine all forms of opposition.

I submit that when a situation has been reached where the country's laws and promulgations deprive people of the right to resist apartheid in a non-violent way, then those laws are not worth obeying.

The Churches are saying that they are not prepared to reach the stage where we live in a war-torn country.

We have appealed to people who still have space - and there are still people who have space - to use it to influence



change. There is no way the children in Soweto can change this system except by resorting to violence. The government has closed other options. But there are still at least three groups of people inside South Africa who have the space to do something to save this country.

The first group is the white community. Whites need to begin looking at strategies and saying 'What is the potential within the system?' They need to analyse whether there is potential and then develop the strategies. But if those strategies do not deliver

results for too long, it is important to reconsider them. Nevertheless, the point remains: the white community has the space to do many things, and that community therefore has an extraordinary responsibility to do them. If you do not use that space, it means that when people continue dying, you will bear co-responsibility for those deaths.

A second group that retains some space is the churches, particularly church leaders. We could still march in protest against the bannings, from St George's Cathedral, in the direction of Parliament (although we did not get very far, which showed me that the road to non-violence is indeed short). Church leaders who talk about non-violence must prove it works. If we do not do it effectively then we may as well surrender and say we have no solution.

Another group that has space is the business community. We have seen in the last few months how the government has tried to woo the business community. There has been 'privatisation', and restrictions on the trade unions. But if business people remain silent, they will also bear responsibility for the lives that are lost.

I commend you in the Black Sash for maintaining a public witness. It is worth mentioning that when church leaders recently discussed non-violent methods - effective non-violent methods - of opposing apartheid, the Black Sash was one of the organisations that was commended for trying to do whatever it could in a repressive situation. □