

LETTER FROM REVEREND ALLAN BOESAK TO THE SOUTH AFRICAN LAW & ORDER MINISTER, ADRIAAN VLOK

1989-02-13



Mr Adriaan Vlok, Minister of Law and Order,
House of Parliament, Cape Town

Mr Minister,

As from this morning I have joined those in detention who have embarked upon a hunger strike. Their action is a dramatic one, which could have fateful consequences for all of us in this country, but first of all for themselves. It is in itself an extraordinary indictment of your government and its policies, but most especially your system of detention without trial. That people have to go to such extreme lengths to focus attention on their plight speaks volumes for the crisis your policies have caused for them, and in them for millions of our people.

Our brothers and sisters on hunger strike are right, of course. They have been taken away in the dead of night, imprisoned without charge. They have been denied the most basic human rights. They have been denied visits by lawyers or clergy or family. Recourse to the courts does not exist, their lawyers are powerless, the law itself has been rendered impotent, indeed you have taken the law and set it aside. You have decided that you alone have the right to declare them guilty, of what crimes they do not know nor do we, or you, for that matter. You have given your police the power to hold them incommunicado for months, and in many cases for years now.

You and your government, and the people who vote for you, have created a system of systematic exploitation, oppression and degradation, the only yardstick being your own privileges. You have wilfully and callously trampled upon the rights and dignity of millions without blinking an eye. You have made laws that make a mockery of the laws of God. When we protested, you have threatened, harassed, teargassed, beaten, imprisoned, detained and killed us. You have promulgated a State of Emergency under which you have given yourself and your security apparatus almost limitless powers.

Your grand design of apartheid has failed. The ideological battle for the hearts and minds of our people has failed. Your so-called reforms have been exposed as merely cosmetic, a pathetic attempt to save whatever you can of apartheid for as long as you can. They have failed. The brutality of the system you have created, the violence you must employ to continue the life of your regime, have failed. And for this failure you are blaming us. That is why your government muzzles the press and bans newspapers. That is why your police break up church services. That is why you detain so many, including children, without trial. And detention without trial is just one of the ways in which you have persistently tried to force us into submission, to break our rightful resistance, and all the while you were trying to hide the miserable failure, the dismal human tragedy that apartheid has become. Now this action is once again reminding you and the world of what you have done.

Over the years we have spoken out against this flagrant abuse of the law. Lawyers have denounced it, the churches have petitioned against it. My own church, the NG Sendingkerk, has been very clear in its witness. Time and time again it has condemned detention without trial as against the demands of God's justice, unbiblical and inhuman. Numerous are the times that the NG Sendingkerk, and so many other Christian churches in this land, have called upon you to cease this evil practice. Parents have pleaded with you, spouses have petitioned you. You were never unaware of the pain and misery you are causing through detention without trial. Now, the hunger strike forces you to recognise the dire consequences of the deliberate contempt with which you have treated so many of God's children.

Why am I joining them? Because I too was a victim of arbitrary detention. I know first hand of the pain and uncertainty, of the terror of solitary confinement and the unspeakable indignity and fear it brings. Because my church has spoken so clearly and I hear in the cries of anguish emanating from your prisons now, the very voice of God calling to his church to respond with solidarity, love and witness. Because the Confession of Belhar tells us that we should stand where God stands, namely on the side of those who are voiceless, to whom injustice is being done. Because Christian witness without action means nothing. Christian witness without (painful) obedience misses the joy of true Christian discipleship.

You have heard the detainees: Release or charge us. This is their right. That is the very least you could do. I am joining them in the hope that you will listen. In the hope also that my action will strengthen their plea. I also hope that many others in the Christian community will join me in this. I am aware that you are on record as saying you will not be 'blackmailed'. What an astonishing admission! Is a call for simple justice blackmail?

But of course there is a deeper question. You are the Minister of Law and Order. Your emergency regulations place the fate of all of us in your hands. You can decide whether people live or die. Are you willing to do that? Fasting until death is not part of my religious or ecclesiastical tradition. Deliberately placing my life in danger is irresponsible, I have been taught. That may be so. But I cannot stand idly by and watch those who are struggling for justice in South Africa starve themselves to death. None of us wish to die. But if this is the road we must take to make you and your government understand the evil of your ways, we will take it. Not gladly, not with pride, certainly with fear and trembling. But I know now what God wants me to do. I can only hope and pray that you know what God wants you to do. For more than anything, Mr Minister, I need to be faithful. It was not easy for me to come to this decision. But I now know what God wants me to do. I can only hope and pray that you know what God wants you to do.

Yours faithfully,

Reverend Dr Allan A Boesak (signed)

13th February, 1989