

INTERNATIONAL

South African Blacks still struggling after apartheid's end

Special to Sentinel-Voice

Part three of a three part series from Cape Town, South Africa
 Robben Island is a small, unimpressive island of rocks and sand, located about four miles beyond Cape Town's harbor. Yet it is known to millions around the world as a landmark of political courage and freedom.

Because it was here on Robben Island that Nelson Mandela and hundreds of political prisoners who opposed the former apartheid regime were confined for several decades.

I walked through the prison gates, and entered the cell block that Nelson Mandela once called home. Mandela's cell was about the size of a small bathroom. The walls and floor are made of concrete and brick. Heavy iron bars at the window block out much of the sunshine.

For his first 14 years here, Mandela's cell only had a bucket for a toilet and a rough woven mat on the floor for sleeping. Meals consisted only of porridge — no meat, fish or vegetables. Mandela and other prisoners labored by day at the limestone quarry on Robben Island, working for hours under the hot sun. The quarry dust and cruel working conditions destroyed or seriously impaired the eyesight of many prisoners.

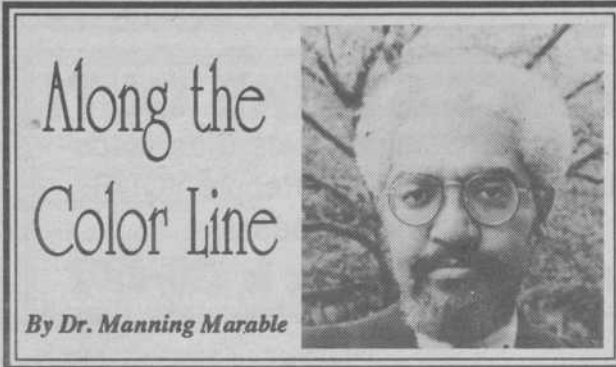
One can only begin to appreciate the dignity and determination of this generation of freedom fighters by walking in their footsteps through prison. Therefore it is difficult to criticize the role of Mandela and his comrades in the African National Congress in the four years since they came to power.

Nevertheless, what has become increasingly clear is that the democratic revolution in South Africa has stalled.

Millions of poor black people who sacrificed and struggled for the ANC have had their hopes dashed. South Africa's 12 million black people, who live literally in shacks made of cardboard, dirt and wood, wonder what happened to the ANC's election promise to build one million new homes for the poor.

The root of the ANC's current dilemma goes back to its compromise agreement with the former apartheid regime.

The racist National Party had "detained" or arrested more than 100,000 anti-apartheid activists since the 1960s. It had tortured to death hundreds of black ANC militants, sometimes forcing their victims to sing their freedom songs while they were



being brutalized. This vicious dictatorship was reluctantly willing to surrender the presidency, the national legislature and most provincial governments. But all other institutions of power would remain under whites' control.

Today, the state security force is still overwhelmingly white. Afrikaans is still the official language of South Africa's armed forces. Nearly a quarter of South Africa's budget is still allocated for military weapons, at a time when millions should be reinvested in the nation's schools, housing, and health care.

The civil service is overwhelmingly white and conservative. The judiciary is virtually all white. In fact, South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission was made necessary precisely because the courts and judges are products of apartheid, and would never hand down fair decisions to black victims.

Economically, the real power continues to be controlled by whites. One recent survey found that 65 percent of all whites are in the top one-fifth income group in the country, compared to only 10 percent of blacks. Conversely, 23 percent of all blacks are in South Africa's lowest income group, compared to only 1 percent for whites.

On the Johannesburg Stock Exchange, black-owned companies represent only 10 percent of all capital holdings.

Given these political and economic structural limits, the ANC quickly backed away from its adherence to socialism, and implemented neoliberal, pro-capitalist policies. Loyal ANC members in trade unions have been told to lower their expectations

for higher wages and improvements in working conditions.

Under the slogan "Africanization," the ANC is bringing more blacks into the governmental bureaucracy and civil service. The government wants to administer tough affirmative action laws that will help expand job opportunities, especially for middle class blacks. ANC leaders have also been extensively involved in setting up cooperative or joint business ventures, describing their strategy as "black empowerment."

Cyril Ramaphosa, a brilliant former secretary-general of the ANC, left government and politics to become the head of a corporation funded largely with Afrikaner capital. Some former ANC officials who once denounced the white capitalist power structure have now joined it. This trend has recently given rise to much criticism that the ANC has ceased to be the public voice of the oppressed.

Writer Ashwin Desai in a recent issue of the *Cape Town Argus* denounced the ANC's affirmative action policy for "not going far enough. It does not robustly protect the jobs of black workers at the expense of white profits, nor does it enable a better life for the disadvantaged by increasing social spending."

By emphasizing themes such as "black empowerment," a limited number of black executives will join Ramaphosa in the corporate suites.

But as Desai observes: "What is ignored by the media and themselves is that they conduct their business in the same way as the white man does and often at the latter's behest ... In this way, the new black elite may obscure the class foundations that enable their emergence and use, instead of racial, legal language to legitimize their quest for material wealth and adornment."

President Mandela has already announced his decision to retire in 1999. It is a virtual certainty that the ANC will win again in next year's national elections. But how long will South Africa's poor and working class blacks wait until their government responds to their urgent needs?

If the ANC does not, it may soon be challenged by many of the same black activists who put it into power.

Dr. Manning Marable is Professor of History and Director of the Institute for Research in African-American Studies at Columbia University.

Robinson: Trade bill a return to colonialism of old

By Malik Russell

Special to Sentinel-Voice

WASHINGTON, D.C. — Randall Robinson, founder and president of TransAfrica Forum, blasted United States policy towards Africa, particularly the recently passed Africa Growth and Opportunity Act, calling it a "return to colonialism."

Robinson also criticized President Clinton's support of the bill and questioned his commitment to racial dialogue, before a crowd of students and visitors at the University of Maryland, College Park.

"On the one hand he will go to Africa as he did on his recent history making (trip) ... That's what's televised. That's what plays out around the world," he said. "But in the fine print you find the president supporting something called the Growth and Opportunity Act. A misnomer, if I ever heard one, for Africa. An act that will in effect, if put into law, will recolonize the African continent in favor of private sector interests in the United States.

The legislation drafted by Rep. Philip Crane, R-Ill., who Robinson says referred to the same African countries as "retards" now has companies "cuing up to buy Africa in a

forced sale."

Speaking at a forum on diversity at the Nyumburu Cultural Center and promoting his recent highly acclaimed memoir "Defending the Spirit: A Black Life in America," Robinson highlighted the unfair language of the bill.

"We're asking these countries to do what we do not allow in our own countries," he said. "We do not allow foreign companies to invest in or buy security-related industries. We do not allow foreign governments to buy certain farmlands, certain timberlands, certain mining concessions and communications facilities. It is against American law. But we are requiring, as a condition of any assistance from the United States for Africa, that they do this for us."

Robinson warned of the private sector's disproportionate impact on foreign policy. "The real powers in this world have no respect or regard for rules," he said. "They're not democracies, their only responsibility is to the shareholders ... We've got to wake up because money plays a far too big role in the making of national politics."

Sneaker giant Nike was

singled out for selling products made under virtual slave conditions.

"We don't hold these people to account," he said.

Robinson was also highly skeptical of President Clinton's commitment to racial progress

and said that race "in 1998 remains the principal social dilemma of our country."

He pointed out that nations around the world are all beginning to deal seriously with the issue of racial reconciliation and challenged

Clinton to move beyond superficial dialogue.

"In Canada, the Canadian government is apologizing to and making reparations available to Native Canadians, a group the Canadian government has repressed

since the 15th century," he said.

"In Great Britain the British are apologizing for colonialism. In the old Eastern-Block former totalitarians are apologizing for Communism. In South Africa there is a Truth (See Trade, Page 14)

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