

# SASH PRESIDENT ATTENDS YWCA HUMAN RIGHTS CONFERENCE

29 speeches, 21 interviews, four radio and two TV broadcasts in 20 days

**T**HE YWCA Conference at Hoddesdon, about an hour's drive north of London, was most restful compared to what followed. It was a conference on Human Rights in preparation for the international Y Conference in Singapore next year. They had chosen three areas to concentrate on — sexism, racism and economic injustice.

I had been invited to speak in the racism section where, of course, South Africa loomed large but where I learnt a good deal about racism in other parts of the world — notably Sri Lanka where the Tamils are being denied citizenship after centuries of residence there and are being deported, back to their 'homeland' in India.

There were two most interesting women from Palestine — one a fiery individual from Jordan and the other a charming person from Jerusalem who composes and sings beautiful songs to express all the tragedy in the middle east. There are many similarities between the emotions and frustrations of the Palestinians and those of black South Africans and the language of dispossession is the same but we were unfortunate in that there were no Israeli women there so felt pressurised sometimes by one side of the story only. The Y is having a consultation in Jerusalem early next year at which they are hoping to achieve a complete across-the-board representation.

Incidentally, I had never realised before that the YWCA is the largest women's organisation in the world with approximately six million members in 84 dif-

ferent countries. Women from all over the world were there. We had a party in which we had to come in ethnic dress — I and Nomanda Bam from Natal were part of the African group from Tanzania, Nigeria and Zambia. They were all glorious in African prints and Xhosa weaves (but I had to make do with a doek and a blanket).

Most interesting was an address by a legal expert in international law. International law does not help aggrieved South Africans very much because our country has not signed some of the most important conventions, so it is not subject to international law in most crucial areas. However one useful and interesting fact came to light. Individuals may register their complaints in writing to The Director, Division of Human Rights, United Nations, Palais des Nations, Geneva.

South Africans aggrieved by the removal of their citizenship would fall into this category. If sufficient individual complaints are received the Division must deal with them and push them through the bureaucratic system for debate. It may be worth thinking about this. The denationalisation of black South Africans is the most crucial issue facing us, I think.

## Free trade zones

The economic injustice section was most valuable. I learnt for the first time (I'm very backward) about 'Free Trade' or 'Export Processing' zones in Third World countries which are very similar to our border industrial areas where firms can establish factories with no responsibility



Sheena in 'ethnic' dress

for social infrastructure. Female youthful labour is preferred and wage determinations and other protective labour legislation are waived.

That trite saying that SA is a microcosm of the world's problems came to have real meaning for me. The pattern of our first world industrial development/third world exploitations really is a mirror of the North/South, have/have not conflicts in the rest of the world.

I missed Paul Oestreicher's address and the section on sexism because I had to fly to Holland for a TV interview.





*A television interview in Holland*

### **Holland**

I went to Holland properly for the three-week lecture tour on October 14 and didn't draw breath again until I fell onto the plane to Edinburgh on November 4. The Women's Church Organisation which organised the programme is VKW — Vrou, Kerk, & Wereld — and they did a fantastic job — 29 public meetings, group meetings and lectures; 10 interviews with various individuals; 11 newspaper and magazine interviews; four radio and two television broadcasts — in 20 days. I talked and talked and talked and met some very interesting people. The two most terrifying meetings were with the Moderation of the Dutch Reformed Church and the Foreign Affairs Committee of the First Chamber (ie the Senate) of the Dutch Parliament but both were very much easier than I had expected. I had meetings with Catholic and Protestant Church groups, the women members of the Dutch Parliament, a Dutch member of the European Parliament, a member of the Belgian Parliament, the Dutch lawyers for Human Rights, two Trade

Union groupings, the General Secretary of the Dutch Council of Churches, students at three different universities and lots of women's groups just like us, as well as various groups which work only on the South African issues.

### **The 'dwaze moeders'**

One newspaper headlined its interview with me, 'Blanke Dwaze Moeder Uit Zuid-Afrika'. The 'dwaze moeders' are the foolish mothers of the Place Di Mayo in Argentina who demonstrate, demanding the release of the disappeared ones.

In Holland the women's groups demonstrate every month at the Hague in support of the foolish mothers. It was a comparison I was proud to be associated with. It is good to feel oneself part of the world-wide struggle for the security and survival of ordinary people against the dark powers of States. I felt very at home with all the women's groups in Holland who are working on a multitude of facets of the fight for simple justice both in Europe and further afield. They are just like us and experience the same

internal debates about 'life style', group rights vs individual rights, guilt about wealth and being placed among the 'haves' of the world, etc; also share the same ideals as we do and work in the same way to achieve them.

The only difference is that they have freedom to express dissent. I think Holland is the most democratic country I have ever been in. I was told that 40 political parties contested the last election and that if you have a concern, however weird, you just form an organisation to concentrate on it and people will join in. They seemed to me most moderate people — 70% tax on all income including all fringe benefits — and great social security for everyone in need. They are not satisfied that they are doing well enough and wage constant warfare against the Transnationals but it seemed to me to be a social democracy that really does ensure a dignified human existence to the most disadvantaged members of the community.

They have tremendous anxieties as well. Amsterdam has a housing shortage of 50 000 units,



more than there were at the end of the war. They are coming to accept that unemployment is there to stay and is now structural. Many people in the future will never have a job and this means that a whole rethink of the Protestant work ethic is a matter of urgency. No one starves in Holland because he does not have a job, but we have made joblessness somehow blameworthy and this means that the unemployed suffer real depression, boredom and feelings of total inadequacy. The young do not plan for the future. They do not believe that they have a future because they are convinced that America and

Russia will eventually fight a 'limited' nuclear war in Europe. The manufacture of smaller nuclear weapons and missiles seems much more threatening to them than the concept of the Hiroshima-type bomb because they believe that it makes it possible for the powers that be to contemplate the use of nuclear weapons which would not inevitable lead to the destruction of the United States. America is not universally popular at the moment.

I was astonished by the level of interest in South Africa and the sound factual information which so many groups circulate, and by the way in which so many people

work with commitment on South African issues. I think I probably gained a distorted impression because I was not meeting the big business interests and the more conservative politicians (although some were present at some of the meetings). Our Government's information service does a most efficient job.

However, the re-imposition of the ban on Beyers Naude undid all their efforts. He is very well known in Holland and greatly admired and respected.

I was overwhelmed with kindness the whole time I was there and came back laden with messages of love and support to all of you.



*A welcoming sign greets two combi loads of Sash members and the Press at the Driefontein turnoff — and a little further on, other signs read, 'Welcome Black Sash. Keep on Helping' and 'Welcome to Driefontein, the land of our forefathers — 1912 - 1983'.*