

André Brink: In View of Dakar

I DO not wish to overrate the significance of Dakar as a potential historical starting point. At the same time it would be unwise to underestimate its value in the way most of the subservient Afrikaans newspapers, and some sections of the English press as well, have done. (This, in itself, was a curious journalistic phenomenon: devoting hundreds, if not thousands, of column inches to explain to readers why Dakar had been a non-event!) Certainly, members of the internal group were not "delegates" representing any kind of "constituency". The Afrikaans press, especially, made much of this, revealing in the process the sad conditioning of the Nationalist mind which can only think in patriarchal and paternalistic terms: only "leaders" can make history; "ordinary people" do not count for anything, are not permitted to influence events or even voice opinions. Whereas, much of the significance of Dakar resided in the very fact that a group of individuals from widely divergent backgrounds and holding

widely divergent views were able to discuss openly and without the constraints of preconception or ideology, aspects of the future of South Africa which profoundly concern us all.

Specific aspects of the discussions as such have already been widely aired at meetings and in the press. What concerns me here is the broader context of the talks, involving both discoveries and re-discoveries, often in the form of a confirmation of impressions already shaped during many previous contacts I have been fortunate to have with members of the ANC in different parts of the world.

1. Basic to the exchange of ideas was the acknowledgement of us all as South Africans. If there was, indeed, an "ANC delegation" and an "IDASA group", if indeed some members of the "internal group" had to make the sad confession that they "knew nothing about the ANC", there never was a sentiment of "us" and "them". Especially during the visit to other West African countries the touring

group headed jointly by Thabo Mbeki and Van Zyl Slabbert experienced a profound sense of "us South Africans". It was an important factor from the first day of discussions when each individual was required to present himself or herself to the audience. To several of the white South Africans it came as a jolt of discovery when one ANC delegate after another announced: I was born in Germiston...in Bloemfontein...in Cape Town...in Schweizer Reneke... Biography and geography became fused in an experience common to us all: and it certainly helped to clear those hurdles inevitably set up by the long and destructive experience of apartheid which has marked us all.

2. Many Afrikaners in the group revealed the ravages of apartheid in distressing ways. One realized anew that the apartheid mentality is demonstrated not only in the lunatic excesses of the AWB or the rantings and ravings of Bothas, but in more subtle distortions of the mind:

In the inability to liberate one's thought processes from the conditioning caused by worries about "what the people back home will think";

In an inability, even among intellectuals concerned with history, to move away from simplistic concepts of "White Nationalism" vs "Black Nationalism" (whereas not only the lucid pronouncements by various members of the ANC but the long history of that organisation demonstrate its commitment to non-racial principles. Two quotes in this respect: "It is the extent and involvement of our white compatriots in the struggle that offers the greatest guarantee for the future"; and: "Never in the history of South Africa have blacks dominated anyone else. We do not want to dominate whites. We shall fight with everything in our power to guarantee that no-one ever dominates others again");

Continued overleaf



Barbara Masekela, Secretary for Arts and Culture, in conversation with Prof. André Brink whose response to the Dakar conference appears on this page.

In the persistence among whites to think that an eventual "solution" can only come from whites, and a concomitant inability to approach the situation from the point of view and the experience of the vast majority of South Africans;

In what appeared like an organic deficiency of empathy, above all of compassion. During a visit to the slave island of Gorée, where some 30 million slaves had been "processed" during the centuries of slavery, some whites merely found it "interesting" — unable to relate it to the presence, in our midst, of Thabo Mbeki whose own father has spent almost a quarter of a century incarcerated on an island just like this, within sight of Cape Town. But when news came of the victimization of the small child of one of our white members, everybody was deeply concerned: *this* they could empathise with.

3. The thorough knowledge of history (both world history and South African history) among members of the ANC stood in alarming contrast to the lack of true historical insight among most of the "internal" group members. On one occasion Mac Maharaj told the meeting of a visit a past minister of justice had paid to Robben Island to berate "terrorists" about their commitment to violence; in response, Nelson Mandela outlined to the minister the ANC's long history of peaceful struggle and the manner in which every conceivable avenue of non-violent response to the institutionalised violence of apartheid had been explored before the decision was taken to form Umkhonto we Sizwe. The minister, aghast, responded: "I never knew about this." Sadly, several of the whites at the meeting also hadn't known. This, it seems to me, is an area where the seeds of Dakar can most usefully be sown, in order to spread and enhance awareness and increase knowledge.

4. What Dakar confirmed above all else was the most simple, yet the most indispensable, of discoveries: that even in a time of escalating violence, talk is still possible. Indeed, the passionate commitment of the ANC to reach the negotiating table — to which the P.W. Botha mentality appears to be the only true stumbling block — must have left an indelible impression on the minds of the "internal"

visitors: "We don't want indiscriminate violence. We don't want any violence which does not have a clearly defined political objective. We need white support. So it would have no strategic sense to institute a campaign against white civilians — and this apart from any

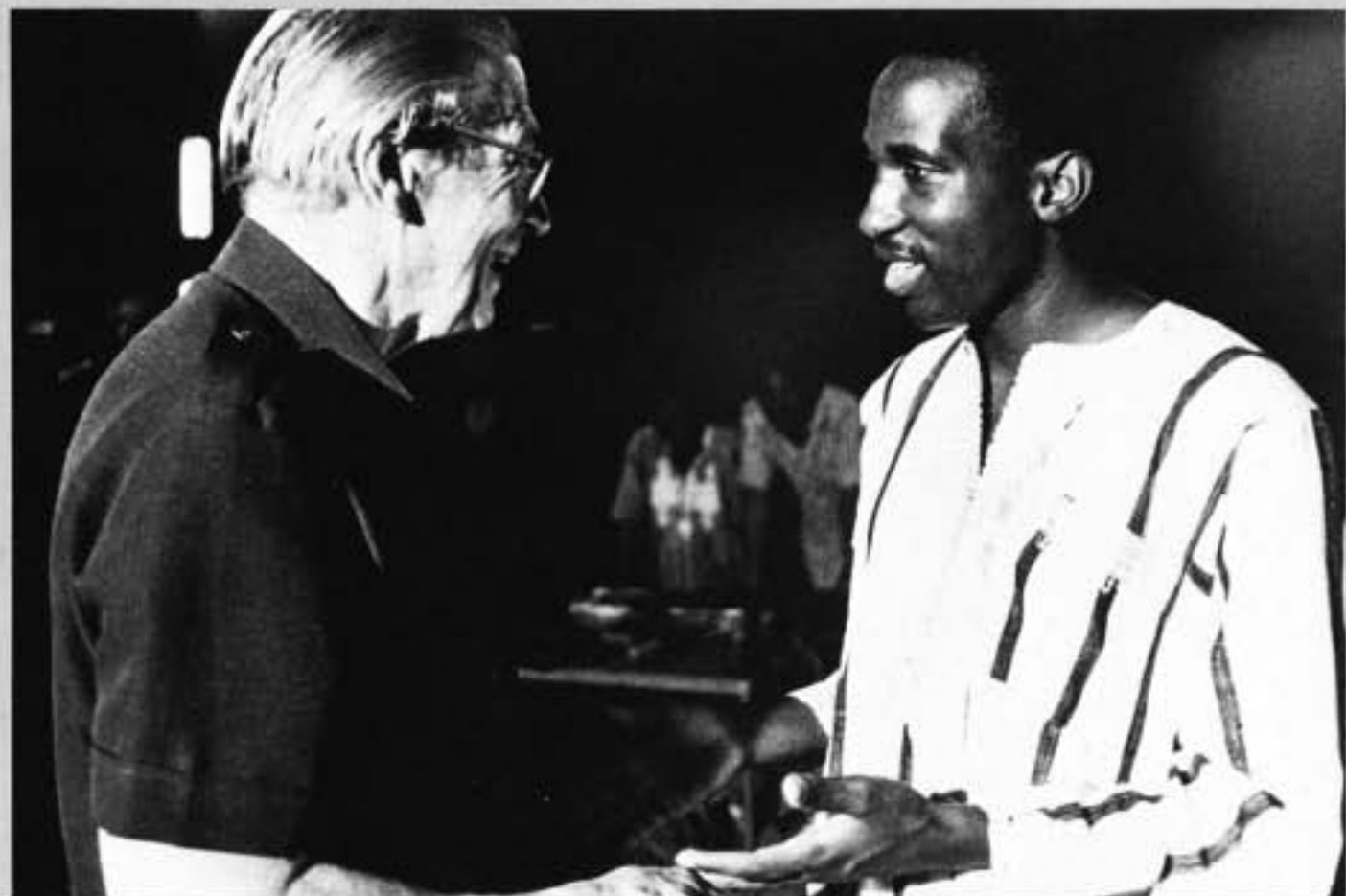
considerations of morality."

5. When members of the ANC spoke about morality, even within a situation in which violence had become endemic ("Failure to resort to armed struggle may bring about greater evil than the resort

PICTORIAL IMPRESS



Mr. Thabo Mbeki and Dr. van Zyl Slabbert, the respective leaders of the two delegations.



Dr. Beyers Naude, former general secretary of the SA Council of Churches, in conversation with President Thomas Sankara of Burkina Faso.

to armed struggle"), one was moved by the perception that this was not a matter of stating theory, or ideology, or of outlining in an abstract or political manner the strategies and programmes of change. This was *lived experience*, embodied in individual men and

women who have all been exposed to violence and knew exactly what they were talking about. A mother who has to prepare her three year old son for self-reliance in case a South African raid on Lusaka — which may happen any day, as it has

happened in the past — leaves her or her husband dead, does not theorize about violence, but lives it every day of her life.

When white members of the IDASA group evoked morality in order to denounce violence, it often had the hollow ring of expedience. It is so easy to preach morality to others; it is so easy to be conscious of the dictates of morality when the historical actions of one's own people have created a situation in which, suddenly, one is faced with a violent response.

A week after our return from Dakar came the ghastly bomb explosion in Johannesburg. It was reported on the same day as the news that the minister of justice had implied guilt by offering to pay R1,3 million in compensation to the relatives of the twenty people — men, women, children and babies — shot, mostly in the back, at Langa in 1985. So where should one look for the true locus of violence and the true roots of morality in South Africa?

6. When all was said and done, one was left with a sense of tragedy: but as in all tragedy, it also carried a germ of hope. The two main adversaries in the present South African confrontation are the Afrikaner and the black African (a deadlock which may eventually be broken by the non-racial approach of the ANC). History has turned them into enemies. And yet they are, probably, the two groups of people in South Africa who have most in common! They share a collective consciousness of a nomadic and peasant existence. Both have been conditioned by tribal experience. Both have chosen Africa as the object of their deepest loyalties and understanding. Both have experienced oppression, and the agonies and exhilaration of a struggle for liberation. In the deepest possible sense they *belong* together.

Dakar has demonstrated, in a small and tentative yet richly significant way, that this can be achieved, since we have the cause, and means, and strength, and will to do it. The single precondition is the destruction of apartheid and every vestige of racism that goes with it; and the removal of the Botha regime from the seat of power it occupies illegally and in the face of history.

ONS FROM DAKAR



Mr. Thabo Mbeki with South African independent T.V. news journalists, Hennie Serfontein and Jimmy Matthews.



President Abdou Diouf of Senegal (left), Dr. van Zyl Slabbert, Breyten Breytenbach and the President's entourage move towards the official opening ceremony of the conference in Dakar.