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S. Africa Takes Cautious Stance on Housing Law

Acting President Attempts to Steer Between ExtrirlesgApart/zeid Restrictions

By William Claiborne

Washington Post Foreign Service

3 CAPE TOWN, South Africa, Feb.

3-In the face of growing pressure from both the left and the right to enforce housing segregation laws uncompromisingly or abandon them, the South African government said today it would do neither. Opening a new session of Parliament, Acting President Chris Heunis said the government had decided to drop a proposed amendment to the 1950 Group Areas Act that would have severely tightened enforcement of racial segregation and forced the eviction of thousands of blacks living illegally in residential areas designated for whites only.

But, Heunis said, the government would find other ways of guaranteeing what it calls "own community life," an apartheid code term for racially segregated residential areas. Heunis, who is leading the government while President Pieter W. . Botha recovers from a stroke he suffered on Jan. 18. said Pretoria "wants to leave room for those who want to exercise their individual rights in a community context." He said the key to limited recognition of individual rights in housing while maintaining protection for the group rights of the white minority lies in alleviating South Africa's acute housing shortage, particularly for its 23 million blacks.

A recently adopted Free Settlers law, which will create some mixed-race neighborhoods for those who want to live in an integrated environment. will 'aaress the question of individual rights, Heunis said. Retention of the existing segregation laws contained in the Group Areas Act will protect group rights, he added.

Heunis' speech suggested that the government's legislative agenda for racial reform in 1989 would continue to be mutious and incremental, With no breakthroughs that would antagonize the growing far right of South Africa's 4.5 million whites.

Information Minister Stoffel van der Merwe, Botha's point man in seeking power-sharing negotiations with the black majority, told reporters "Of course, you c

nnot expecting 1950s-style petty apartheid in spectacular innovations in a speech public parks and libraries, there have like this."

He said that Botha, who is expected to convalesce for at least another month, was not even shown a copy of the speech before it was

delivered. Van der Merwe said the nature of Botha's illness requires that he be "protected from all forms of stress," including that of reviewing a text of a speech.

On Thursday, Botha resigned his post as leader of the ruling National Party in a move that was seen as intended to minimize the struggle to succeed him. Education Minister Frederik W. de Klerk stepped into the party post. Van der Merwe's remarks suggested that there will be very little policy input by Botha on the government's reform program in the months ahead.

Heunis' speech, which cabinet officials said reflected Botha's thinking even if he did not read it, did not appear to satisfy the demands of either liberal or conservative critics of the government's handling of the housing segregation issue.

Attention was focused on the issue last week when an unruly mob of white vigilantes prevented a family of Indian descent from moving into Johannesburg's mixed-race Mayfair neighborhood. The family left the neighborhood after receiving death threats as a mob of whites surrounded their house, painted racist slogans on the windows and walls and hung a noose.

Warning that de facto integration of white areas by nonwhites ignoring housing segregation laws could lead to open race warfare, some conservative white politicians have challenged the government either to repeal the Group Areas Act or enforce it rigidly. Included among those pressuring the government are leaders of the white supremacist Conservative Party who have issued similar enforce-or-repeal challenges regarding all the segregation laws.

In the town of Boksburg near Johannesburg, where Conservatives won the municipal election last October and immediately began reviving demands that the central government either repeal the 1953 Separate Amenities Act or allow local councils to apply it fully, even in areas that have become integrated. For their own reasons, white liberal politicians are also challenging the government to enforce or scrap segregation laws it adopted. The liberals say the laws are unenforceable and the government can be compelled to repeal them.

But van der Merwe said, "The simple repeal of a law like the Separate Amenities Act would create legal uncertainty and would lead to upheaval." He said that it would take years for attitudes of whites to change.

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