

INTERVIEW

Helen Joseph~ a woman of courage

April 1984 is the twentieth anniversary of the founding of the Federation of South African Women (FSAW), which united women of different races in South Africa against apartheid. Helen Joseph was National Secretary of FSAW in the 1950s. For many years she has been under banning orders and at present may not be quoted in South Africa. A woman of courage and commitment she is known as one of the mothers of the struggle. This interview, conducted in 1982 by Father Jim Consedine of New Zealand, is published here for the first time. Because of the importance of Helen Joseph's views we are printing the interview in full, divided into two parts. Part 2 will appear in Newsletter No. 14.

JC: Helen Joseph, you're known in many parts of the world now as a champion of the oppressed people of South Africa. You've been a long campaigner against apartheid. Perhaps the earliest time the world heard of you was during the treason trial way back in the mid-fifties. Do you remember much about those days?

HJ: I remember a great deal about it. Today there's such an interest in the 1950s. They call it the decade of defiance. That was when I came into the political field, in the most exciting times. When we were still able to organise great demonstrations and hold our conferences. We could still do a lot. The first major trial then was the treason trial where 155 of us were arrested. Those were the years when we organised the big demonstrations of women to the Union Buildings in Pretoria. The first one in 1955 was 2,000; the second one in 1956 was 20,000. That's one of the peaks, absolutely. They were the most exciting years for me, particularly because I only came into the political world when I was already nearly fifty.

JC: The people at the treason trial were from all races. Were those the



*Two mothers of the struggle
Helen Joseph and Dora Tamana.
Dora died on July 23rd, 1983.*

days when things were still pretty well mixed?

HJ: Oh absolutely. You see we had formed the Congress Alliance, which was composed of the African National Congress, the South African Indian Congress, the Congress of Democrats - which was the white organisation, my organisation, which was later banned - and then also

the South African Coloured Peoples Organisation. We didn't have one multi-racial organisation; we had a multi-racial alliance. But the feeling at that time, and it was very strong in the ANC, was that it was the place of each racial group to work amongst its own people. Lots of young whites particularly would have been very happy to join the ANC, but their leader said 'No, our job is to work amongst the whites.' And a very hard job it was too. But we were very proud to belong to this alliance.

JC: Were you at Kliptown in 1955 when the Congress of the People adopted the Freedom Charter?

HJ: Yes, I was there. I'd been working for it beforehand through my own organisation which was not only the Congress of Democrats but the Federation of South African Women, which was a multi-racial organisation. It went on for two days, that great congress with 3000 delegates there. They'd come from all over South Africa. The spirit was so high. The Freedom Charter that we adopted then was not something that was thought up at top level. For two years the congresses had been working at the grass roots all over the country asking people 'What do you want? What are your grievances? What do you want for South Africa?' The people sent these demands in on little bits of paper. There were over 2000 bits of paper that had come in from all over South Africa and out of that came an amalgam which is now the Freedom Charter, which can never die because it expresses the hopes and the heartaches of the people. Final drafting was done by a committee, but the body of it comes from the express desires and the wants and the aches and the hopes of the people.



Really late in the afternoon of the second day we had four hundred police arrive and put a cordon all around the delegates' enclosure. Armed police of course. We had a sort of makeshift platform in the middle. I was just going to make my speech on how there should be houses, security and comfort. I was already on the platform. Then the chairman said to the delegates: 'The police are here. They say they are investigating a charge of high treason. Do you want to go on with the Freedom Charter?' And you know three thousand people roared out 'Yes', and they all rose to their feet and sang of course Nkosi Sikelele. Then we went straight on and the police went on with their searching. They searched every one of those delegates, looking for papers, copies of the Freedom Charter. I know one woman ate her copy. She said 'The police are not going to get that.' I stood on the platform. In all the melee when the police almost stormed that little platform someone had broken the mike stand. But someone stood with the mike in front of me, wobbling a little bit, and I spoke through it. I thought: 'The people are never going to listen to me. How can they? We're being raided. People are being searched.' Then as I was speaking

I looked and I saw that the people were all looking at the platform. They were not taking the slightest notice of the police. They could have been an army of ants scurrying backwards and forwards. People had come to adopt the Freedom Charter and that is what they were going to do. After that we had the next session 'There shall be peace and friendship'. Speakers spoke to that. Then we adopted the Freedom Charter and that was that. The Freedom Charter, as you know, is for all time.

JC: That must have been a momentous occasion. The next year 150 plus of you were arrested and charged with high treason. Was the result of that trial a major setback?

HJ: That's a very difficult question to answer. It certainly was a major setback. The trial went on for four and a quarter years. The main leaders of the

organisations were all brought together and to some extent were immobilised, and that was a terrible feeling of frustration. I will never forget the day of Sharpeville when we sat in court knowing that we could do nothing. That was pure agony. But against that you must realise that that trial brought together in a way that had never happened before, all the leaders of the different organisations, so we became one body of people. Especially when we got down to the last 30 we really were just one strong family of people. My impression - this is a very personal thing but I hold it very strongly - is that the treason trial did not hold back the struggle for liberation. Anything but. It strengthened it. Perhaps some of our campaigns were more difficult to organise and didn't go ahead with the same momentum as before. But other campaigns did. The leaders delegated their leadership to others in the congresses and the unity was enormously strong. We



Three of the women accused at the Treason Trial, 1956. They were (from left to right) Sonia Bunting, Yettah Barenblatt and Helen Joseph.

were all together in this. I would say now that we actually went further forward.

Why I say it's a difficult question to answer is because this is now nearly thirty years later. There's a great deal of interest in the 1950s and a great deal of historical research. This is my quarrel with the researchers, they don't tell it like it was. They analyse from what records they have. They're inclined to say: 'Well the treason trial knocked the guts out of the liberation movement.' It was nothing of the sort. If they'd been there and been part of it they would feel as I do about it.

JC: Were people found guilty?

HJ: They were all acquitted. We couldn't believe it you know. We could see our case was getting stronger. We were down to 30 by that time. Lawyers kept saying 'You know we're making very good progress.' Then ten days before the end of the trial the judges stopped our defence and said they didn't want to hear any more. They thought they could 'come to a conclusion.' Now the lawyers were jubilant because they said no judge could dare do

that if he's not going to acquit you. But we didn't believe it. We went over to Pretoria for the last day in our treason buses singing our guts out. Everyone went over without one shred of paper in their pockets, because you know that if you're likely to go to jail you don't take any letters with you. We'd taken money, just in case. We didn't know. When we got into court three judges came in. They told us to stand. Then they told us to sit. Judge Rumpff read the judgment. I listened and I listened and I got confused as I listened. I think we all did. Then he got to the last words, which are still the most beautiful words in the English language: 'You are found not guilty and discharged, and you may go.' They'd called us to our feet for that. We were stunned. We stood there absolutely motionless. The judges left the court and we were as if we had been pole-axed. I looked at the lawyers and I saw that they were jumping up and down with joy. Then we knew that it was true and everyone went wild. They say of that night that there wasn't a house in Soweto where there wasn't a party.



Despite continual harassment, Helen Joseph remains active in the struggle. She is seen here at the launch of the United Democratic Front, 1983.

DEPO~PROVERA: an alternative viewpoint

The Debate Column is designed to stimulate discussion around controversial issues amongst our readers. The column writer does not necessarily reflect the views of the AAM Women's Committee.

Much adverse publicity has recently been given to one particular contraceptive. Extravagant claims have been made about its dangers and highly unpleasant side-effects and about its use as a tool of eugenics. For many women in South Africa such descriptions of Depo-Provera are quite remote from their own experience of this effective contraceptive.

The vociferous and increasingly successful lobby against this injectable form of progesterone has two basic points. First, the drug's side-effects, if they occur, are unacceptably bad, and inevitably go on for three months (the duration of the drug's action). The other is that women may be given the drug unknowingly and without their consent.

The latter argument must, of course, be up-held. But why is DP singled out in this way, when other drugs, with devastating side-effects and of questionable value are accepted - and women are even subjected to surgical procedures; episiotomy during childbirth which may leave permanent scars, does not require consent by law. The issue is that of informed consent, and applies equally to these procedures as it does to DP. Side-effects, especially excessive bleeding, are a problem in a small percentage of women, especially after the first injection. Often women who opt to try again find them much improved. But while side-effects are undoubtedly distressing, not one single death has been attributed to DP, in sharp contrast to the small but proven number of fatalities

directly linked with the oral contraceptive. Then the argument goes 'but the effects go on so long and can't be reversed'. But a drug does not have to be in depo form for its effects to last more than a few hours. Anyone who has been taking oral contraceptive and incidentally needs to have a surgical operation, will know that she is advised to stop the pill for at least six weeks beforehand because the effects of a pill taken daily can persist that long.

Feminists in the west have spear-headed the campaign to have Depo-Provera banned. While a ban in Britain or America may not do more than inconvenience women by reducing the choice available, it shows scant concern for their sisters in parts of the world where laws are different and social structures disadvantage women.

In South Africa there is no legal abortion. This very much alters the acceptability of barrier methods, only about 85% reliable. Older women are particularly at risk both from pregnancy and from the oral contraceptive. The male partner could have a vasectomy. Sadly South African men feel very threatened by this and few agree. Sterilisation for women carries more risk and doctors will not carry it out without the husband's consent.

This leads to the other great advantage of an injectable contraceptive. It can be completely secret. Pills can be found and destroyed - and often are. Men can refuse to use barrier methods and can easily detect a cap or the protruding string of a coil. But for many a woman, a secret injection once every three months, has been a liberation from annual child-bearing, giving her hope and confidence, and a significant degree of self-determination.

BOOK REVIEW

WOMEN OF NAMIBIA

WOMEN OF NAMIBIA -The changing role of Namibian women from traditional pre-colonialist times to the present, by Ndentala Selma Hishongwa, 1982, Forlaget By och Bygd, Netherlands.

This is an interesting, concise little book both as an introduction to the apartheid system in Namibia and particularly how it affects women, but also in analysing the inevitable struggle for the liberation of the women themselves in an independent Namibia, by comparing how womens' liberation struggles have progressed in Angola and Zimbabwe since independence.

In analysing the role and position of women in Namibian society today the author begins with general information about the country, background to the position of Namibian women before colonialism and the suffering of women at the present time under colonial rule.

She describes most vividly the effect of the contract labour system which totally destroys Namibian family life - and involves a double hardship for Namibian women in being left alone for most of the time, having to farm what little fertile land is available in the bantustans and cope with looking after children, and the fact that the women's traditional place is inside the home. To make the situation of the Namibian women worse, they are mostly uneducated; even those who have had a little schooling still only have a low level of education because of the Bantu Education system introduced by the South African government.

However, the Namibian women are resisting these imposed conditions and have joined the liberation movement SWAPO, and participate in political meetings and rallies. She also describes how, through these activities women have been detained, tortured, harassed - but

also the valuable contribution that the women have played in the liberation struggle, especially in the army, where for the first time in their history they are being treated as equals, and are being given commanding posts within the army, having to cope with male attitudes towards this.

Women as refugees in the neighbouring countries of Angola and Zambia are building up schools and health posts and are being trained as nurses, drivers, mechanics, electricians, secretaries, accountants, social workers - which the women of Namibia have never been able to achieve before.

The final part of the book, which deals with the liberation of women in a free Namibia, goes into the potential problems for the women in overcoming the deeply entrenched taboos of the traditional role of women. It stresses the need for women to participate fully in the government and to have the necessary education and self-awareness to be able to do this. It also includes interesting sections on Family Planning, Women's Position in the Household, and also Race Relations, to overcome any hostility and discrimination which may remain between black and 'coloured' people.

The book contains many interesting new photographs which complement the text, and apart from frequent printing errors and slight repetition of text is highly recommended.

Beverley Howe.



1984 : YEAR OF THE WOMEN

Shaking the prison walls

On Friday 24th February, Albertina Sisulu was sentenced to four years (with two years suspended) on charges of 'furthering the aims of the ANC'. Thami Mali, a 25 year old Soweto schoolteacher, received 5 years on the same charge.

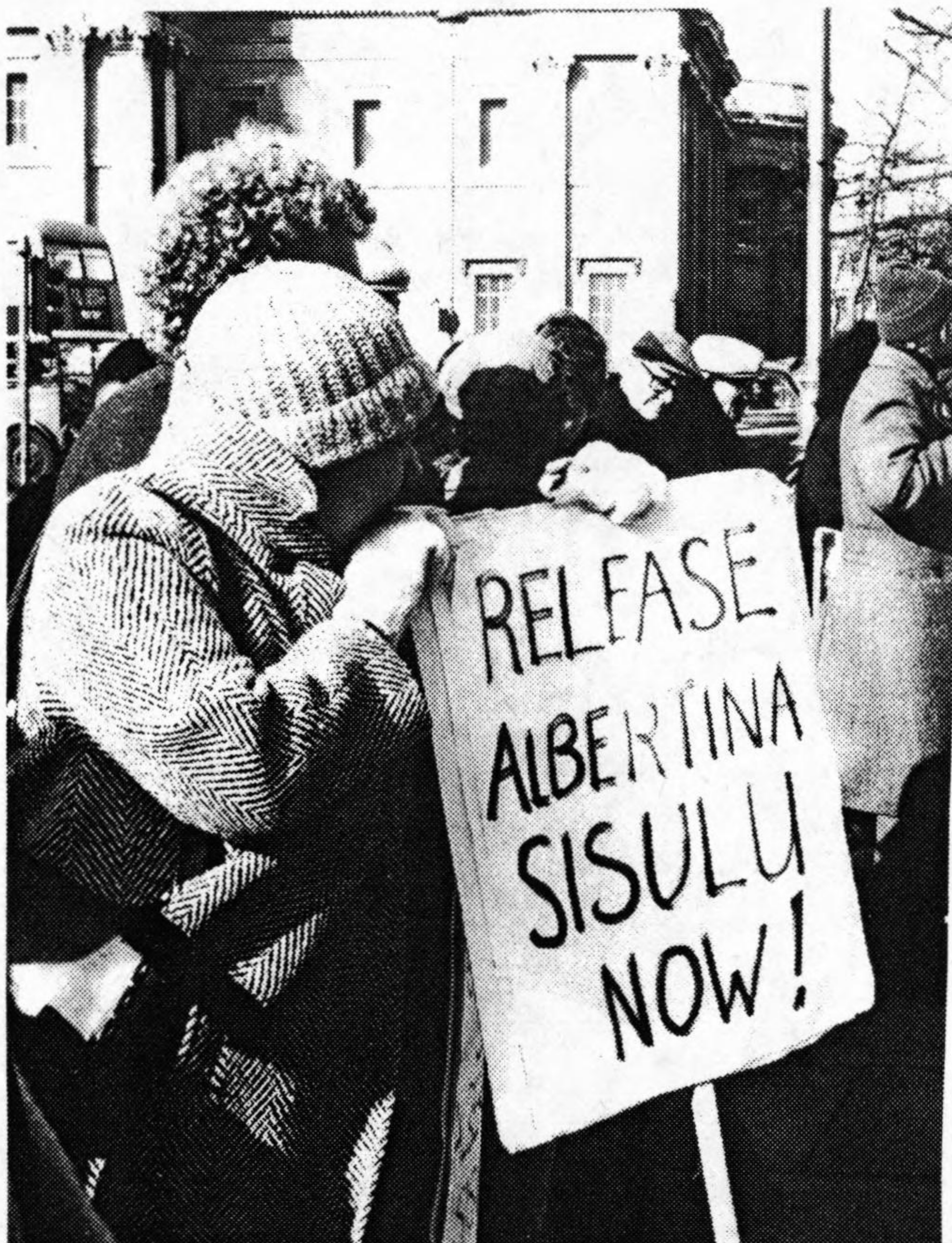
The charges arose from their attendance at the funeral of Rose Mbele, a former member of the Federation of South African Women, on 16th January 1982. It was alleged that the two sang ANC songs during the service, distributed ANC pamphlets and stickers, and draped the coffin with a flag in ANC colours.

The 'evidence' leading to the conviction by the white-only, no-jury court was astonishingly contrived. The 'revolutionary song' that was sung was 'Nkosi Sikelel' iAfrika' (God Bless

Africa) - widely recognised as the Black national anthem. This song, whilst traditionally associated with resistance, is sung throughout Southern Africa and appears in some church hymnals.

The 'ANC colours' - green, black and gold - have been widely adopted by Black organisations, and even by a well-known soccer club. The 'stickers and pamphlets' were no more than bits of coloured paper in three colours.

The arrest took place 19 months after the alleged offence happened and she was detained for 6 months whilst awaiting trial. As a result of the campaign supporting her, the apartheid regime has taken the almost unprecedented step of granting her bail of R1000, pending her appeal against both conviction and sentence.



Women political prisoners are the most oppressed section of those incarcerated under apartheid law. One of the most common abuses inflicted on women prisoners is 'isolation', which is imposed on the slightest pretext. The prisoners have no opportunity to defend themselves against allegations of contravening prison regulations, and the duration of the isolation period is indefinite and at the discretion of prison officials. A sworn affidavit by Caesarina Makhoere revealed that she was kept in isolation 23 hours each day between April 1979 and October 1981. The isolation included denial of work, restricted exercise, denial of any reading matter except the bible, restrictions on receipt of letters and visitors, and refusal of the right to study.

Sick prisoners are at times denied medical attention with the result, as in the case of Florence Matomela, that she died 6 months after release due to neglected diabetes. Despite years of abuse and suffering, these women political prisoners maintain a remarkable spirit of defiance which has brought them out on hunger strikes and led them to contravene regulations in support of demands for better conditions.

In 1984 the Year of the Women, we must all make special efforts to mobilise support for women in South Africa, Namibia and in the Front Line States, in their struggle against apartheid.



- ☐ AFRICAN SOUNDS ☐
- ☐ FOR MANDELA ☐
- ☐ Hugh Masekela ☐
- ☐ Jazz Afrika ☐
- ☐ Orchestre Jazira ☐

New LP recorded at Alexandra Palace on 17 July 1983 in celebration of Nelson Mandela's 65th birthday

Available for £5 plus £1 postage and packing from the Anti-Apartheid Movement – complete and return the attached coupon now

Please send me copies of *African Sounds for Mandela*
I enclose cheque/PO for £..... payable to African Sounds (£6 per copy incl p&p)

NAME.

Address.

Return to: AAM, 13 Mandela Street, London NW1 0DW

Prizes!

Anti-Apartheid Movement

25TH ANNIVERSARY RAFFLE 1984

1st prize HOLIDAY FOR TWO IN BULGARIA

2nd prize LADIES 9CT GOLD WATCH

3rd prizes MAKONDE CARVINGS

Runner-up prizes of 20 African Sounds LPs
plus many other prizes

Tickets 20p each, to be returned by 26 June 1984. Books of tickets available from AAM – order yours now!

Promoter: Mr A P O'Dowd, AAM, 13 Mandela (formerly Selous) Street, London NW1 0DW

SUBSCRIPTION FORM

I wish to subscribe to the Anti-Apartheid Women's Committee Newsletter. I enclose £3 annual subscription fee. (£4 overseas)

NAME: _____

ADDRESS: _____

Please make cheques/postal orders payable to AAM and send to AAM HQ., 13 Selous St., London NW1