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FRIDAY, JUNE 26, 1987

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Panel hears woes of South African detainees

By Yvonne Brooks  
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WASHINGTON - Her 16-year-old son has been detained by South African police without charges for six months and another son has been in 'hiding because of fears that he will be killed.

With a voice choked with emotion, Sylvia Dlomo Jele yesterday gave a congressional panel one parent's account of widespread detention and torture of black children by the South African government.

"Every mother is crying about what is happening in our country," said Jele. "When I finally saw my son he was dark, his lips were dry and I just couldn't talk."

According to the Detainees' Parents Support Committee, more than 10,000 children have been jailed without charge or trial since the state of emergency declared by the government in June 1980. According to the organization, most children who are detained are assaulted or tortured by the security

forces. The abuses include beating, death threats, electric shocks to the body and food and sleep deprivation, among others.

In a telephone interview, a South African Embassy spokesman called figures placing the number of youth detained at over

10,000 "unsubstantiated and false." A written embassy state-

ment states that fewer than 200 minors are held by South African authorities, and all are held in connection with investigations of serious crimes. Including murder.

Civil rights groups in South Africa said earlier this month that 800 black detainees were released but that 2,000, about one-third under 18, were still behind bars.

"Surely, the arrest, torture and shooting of children must be viewed as so inconsistent with standards and values of civilized society as to rank as a crime against humanity," said Sen. Edward M. Kennedy, cochairman of the symposium.

A Senate resolution cosponsored by Kennedy calls for the

white minority regime to release all detained children. In addition, the measure stipulates that the names and location of detained children be made public and that the children be allowed to see their parents. A House resolution is expected to be introduced soon requesting Congress to enact sweeping sanctions against the South African government if it does not release detained children.

"Detention in South Africa is designed to keep those jailed away from society and their political activity," said Marumo Mocrane, a South African lawyer. "The youth are targeted because they are the ones in South Africa that are taking to the streets to protest the system."

According to Moerane, detainees have virtually no rights. Families do not have to be notified of detentions and rarely are, there are no visitation rights for parents or lawyers, rights are read to the detainee, and detainees can be interrogated or left in jail for un-

limited time periods without ever

being charged with a crime, Moerane said.

Patrick Makhoba, 17, told the panel he was detained for 42 days last year after being picked up at school with seven other youths. Although never charged, he said he spent 39 days in solitary confinement and was kicked, stomped and spit on by South African police during interrogation.

“They told me my parents were in detention. They told me they had shot my little brother. This just made it worse for me,” he said. “I just felt myself dying. I saw no other way of protecting myself. I just told myself, ‘If I have to die here, OK. That’s just the way things are.’”

Pule Nape, 22, and a member of an anti-apartheid group, said he has been detained twice for a total of 14 months. He said he was never questioned and was hospitalized for six months for mental depression. During the time his mother died.

“I was not given permission to go and bury my mother,” he said.