

ANC issues ultimatum to De Klerk

David Beresford
in Johannesburg

A NEW militancy was imposed on the leadership of the African National Congress by its grassroots membership at the weekend, when 1,600 delegates to its consultative conference here warned the South African government it faces a suspension of peace negotiations unless it removes obstacles to a settlement by the end of April.

A 60,000-strong crowd roared approval of the militant stance as the ANC deputy president, Nelson Mandela, later announced the conference decisions to supporters at a football stadium on the outskirts of Soweto. The crowd, who had waited for four hours in the rain, also gave the ANC president, Oliver Tambo, a rapturous welcome home from a 30-year exile.

The three-day conference, most of which took place behind closed doors, appears to have given vent to a sense of frustration among ordinary members at the leadership's failure to take a tougher stance.

Although Mr Mandela once again stamped his authority on the organisation, the mood among delegates is likely to colour the leadership's approach to negotiations with President F. W. de Klerk. It may also cause a purging of the "old guard" when elections are held at the national conference scheduled for June.

Declaring that "our patience with this regime is running out," the conference instructed the executive to inform the government that "unless all the obstacles are removed on, or before April 30, 1991, the ANC shall consider the suspension of the whole negotiation process". It mandated the executive to proceed with "talks about talks" with the government, but stipulated that they be conducted "without any secrecy and confidentiality".

The obstacles to talks were identified as the government's failure to end political trials, free all political prisoners, repeal security laws, allow the return of exiles, and deal with township violence.

Apart from the militant mood, the weekend's proceedings — the ANC's first confer-

ence in South Africa for more than three decades — were marked by a serious setback for the organisation on the sanctions front, with the European Community deciding in Rome on Saturday to lift its ban on new investments in South Africa despite a plea by the ANC.

The gap in perceptions between the two organisations was underlined by the stance taken on sanctions by the ANC conference.

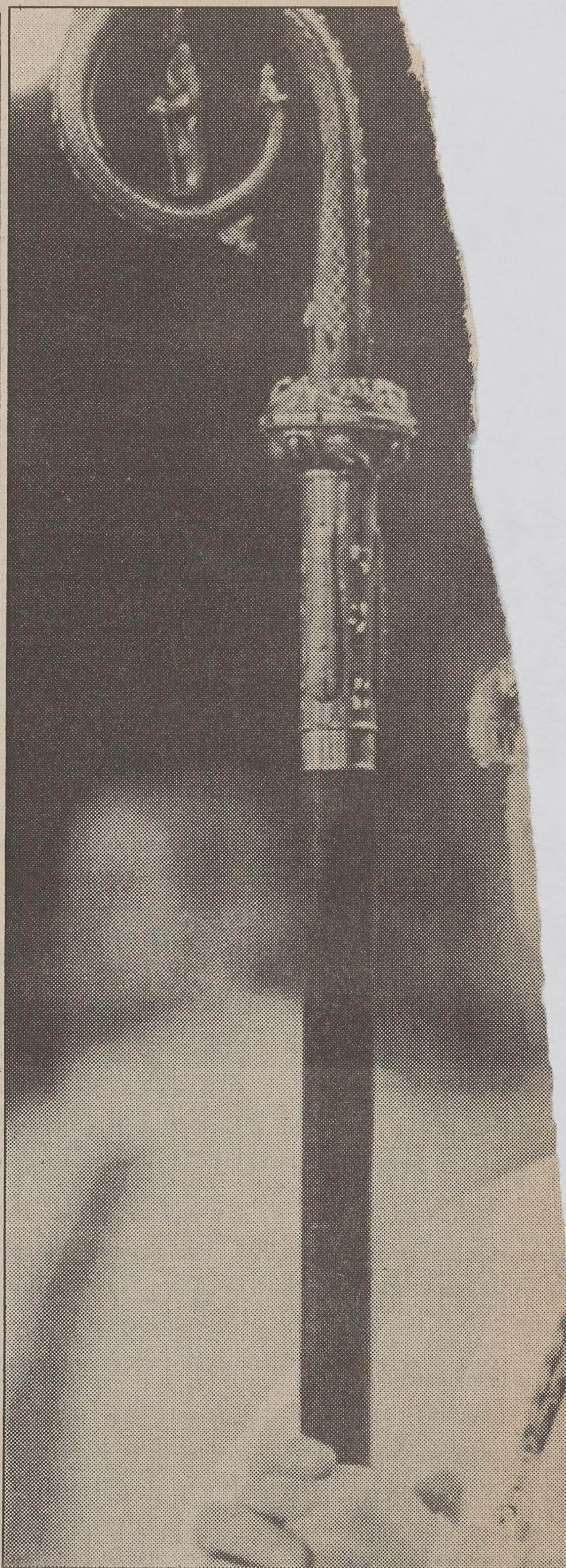
The leadership had attempted to push through a reassessment of sanctions, on the grounds that they were in danger of losing the initiative if they failed to show flexibility on the issue. Mr Tambo told delegates it was time to "re-evaluate the advisability of sanctions in view of developments in the country and abroad".

But the conference, while not directly repudiating that view, produced a 15-clause resolution declaring that "the existing campaign should be maintained", and warning that "the formulation of a contingency position on sanctions is tantamount to anticipating defeat on the issue".

Mr Mandela handled the militant mood adroitly in a closing speech yesterday. While conceding there had been differences between the grassroots membership and the leadership — "we leave this hall closer to one another than before" — he warned against "factions and cliques whose aim is to prove how revolutionary they are" without making any positive contribution to the struggle.

He dismissed claims that blacks were opposed to negotiations, and rejected the demand that there should be no confidential talks between the ANC and the government. "This call can only be made by those who do not understand the nature of negotiations and the practical problems facing us on the ground," he said. "There would be no prospect of negotiations today if there were no confidential meetings, and we propose to continue these."

● Officials of the Pan Africanist Congress had to flee to the South African border by taxi at the weekend, to beat a deadline on a limited indemnity granted by the government to enable them to attend their conference a week previously. Indemnities extended to 24 PAC officials expired at midnight on Friday.



Dr Cardinal Daly at his installation as Archbishop of Armagh and Primate of All Ireland