

AT 11.30 next Monday night, an estimated 5.5-million American television viewers will see Pik Botha and Bishop Desmond Tutu go head to head, unedited and almost live.

Moderating the encounter — and four more like it between a broad range of opposing viewpoints on ensuing evenings — will be one of America's most universally respected interviewers, Ted Koppel, anchorman of the American Broadcasting Company's (ABC) "Nightline" current affairs broadcast.

This is not the first time that Koppel has taken his programme to the news ... but the idea of devoting five consecutive nights to dissecting a nation's problems on location is pioneering to say the least.

One of the more extraordinary aspects is that the South African Government has agreed to place no restrictions on Koppel, and has even permitted ABC to make full use of SABC's facilities.

More revolutionary still is that interviews will take place in areas that Pretoria has been loath to let any outsider see too thoroughly, among them Soweto, and this at a time when a num-

Live from SA: the Pik and Tutu show

SIMON BARBER in Washington

ber of journalists from other United States news organisations have been denied visas outright.

According to "Nightline" spokeswoman Kim Edmonds, Koppel and his executive producer Rick Kaplan originally thought of devoting a single broadcast to South Africa, but concluded that a mere half-hour did not merit the expense.

As the anti-apartheid protest movement gathered momentum last December, they thought again: if not one programme, why not, as Miss Edmonds put it, "go the whole hog" ... give the subject the attention it increasingly seems to deserve, and break new ground in the process.

Visas for Koppel and some 25 other reporters, producers, cameramen and technicians were granted

on February 8, largely at the urging of one of the programmes most ardent fans (and occasional guests) Ambassador Brand Fourie.

Many Western journalists might flinch at being called "fair" by the South African Government. In this case, however, the Government is voicing an opinion that even its harshest critics would be hard put to disagree with.

This has partly to do with "Nightline's" format, which will be followed strictly, and at considerable cost, in South Africa.

The key, however, is the moderator himself. At the start of each show, Koppel, sitting alone amid television monitors and other high-tech paraphernalia, unveils the night's topic and announces who is to be interviewed.

A correspondent — or correspondents — then provide a quick fill-in on the facts. After a commercial break, we return to Koppel.

The interviewees, even if they happen to be on the spot, are in a separate studio, facing television cameras. Others are linked to the set by landline or satellite.

Koppel can see their faces on monitors, as can the audience. They cannot see him, but only hear his and other guest's voices through discreet earplugs. All thus start on an equal, impersonal, footing.

The questioning, seldom scripted in advance, is direct and studiously devoid of guile ... the sort of questions that a disinterested observer might ask if confronted with and eager to learn about the situation at hand.

Strenuous efforts are made to ensure that everyone gets equal time, and has an equal opportunity to respond to each other's replies.

Monday's session might begin as follows: "Mr Botha, your Government says that it wants genuine change. At the same time it is charging a number of opposition leaders with treason.

"A lot of Americans see contradictions here. Tell us, if you will, how the two aspects are consistent?"

If the Foreign Minister (for his information, even the Soviet Apparatchiks Koppel sometimes brings in via satellite call him "Ted") attempts to deliver a set and not altogether apposite response, he will be nudged briskly but politely back to the question.

Koppel, who will also cut Mr Botha off if he gets carried away and starts hogging airtime, will then put a similar question to Bishop Tutu, but phrase it, devil's advocate-style, from Pre-

toria's point of view.

For example: "Mr Botha says the Government has embarked on genuine reform, but that there are hostile forces who are not interested in peaceful dialogue, but who are trying to subvert the process. What do you say to that?"

The Bishop will not be allowed to wander either.

The basic premise throughout is to elicit information and points of view as non-judgmentally as possible in order to help the man in the street understand the issues and make up his own mind.

The regular result is that the man in the street, even if he happens to be a recently landed Martian, finds himself informed.

Only occasionally has Koppel lapsed into the pushiness exhibited by interviewers like the BBC's Sir Robin Day. The most recent occasion involved Democratic vice-presidential candidate Geraldine Ferraro.

Ms Ferraro — prospective South African interviewees take note — failed to answer the questions as posed on a series of foreign policy issues. Koppel became inquisitorial.

Rare among America's breed of R2-million-a-year media superstars, he was later penitent. "I was arrogant," he told the New York Times. "I was so intense and had done such a job of preparing and having my questions carefully honed that I was a different kind of interviewer and didn't go with the flow."

Whatever happens next week, we are in for some interesting television.

Pretoria has taken a fascinating gamble, but, if it truly wants a balanced picture of South Africa to be presented in the United States, it has placed its money on the right man.