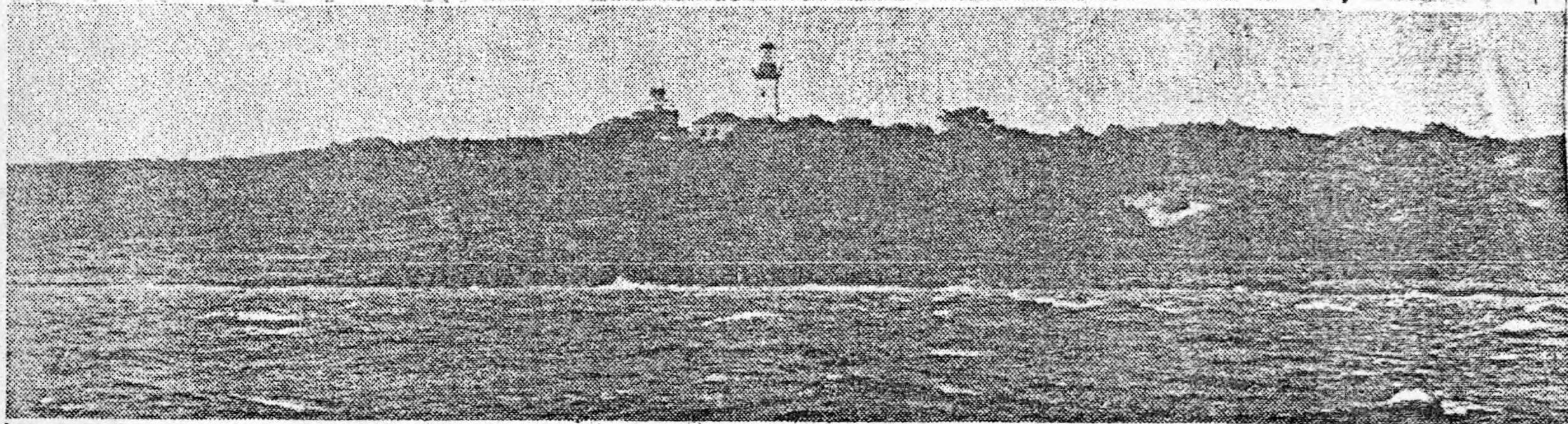


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file Mandela

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Robben Island, in Table Bay off the coast of Cape Town, South Africa, is the site of a political prison that houses 480 inmates

South African Drive Seeks Freedom for

By JOHN F. BURNS

Special to The New York Times

CAPE TOWN, May 20 — Viewed through a telescope atop Table Mountain, it looks idyllic: an island glistening in Table Bay, choppy Atlantic waters washing its rocky shore, with a cluster of whitewashed buildings that could be any South African country town.

Nothing would suggest to the casual eye that Robben Island, seven miles from Cape Town harbor on the leeward side of one of the world's busiest shipping routes, was the site of a prison. But in the psyche of South Africa's black nationalists and in the pages of South African history, "the

Key Black Leader

island" has a connotation akin to that of Alcatraz or Devil's Island.

Jan van Riebeeck, founder of the Dutch settlement here in 1652, used the three square miles of scrub grass as a place of banishment for dissidents. For decades after 1850, it was used as a leper colony, a mental asylum and a place to sequester the chronically sick. In 1931 the South African Navy took it over and used it for 30 years to guard the seaward approaches to Cape Town until the Government again retrieved it as a political prison.

Campaign to Free a Prisoner

Among South Africans it is the ultimate metaphor for isolation, but it is attracting fresh attention because of a campaign to free one of the 480 prisoners, a tall, imposing man by the name of Nelson R. Mandela. Known to the South African press in his younger days as "the Black Pimpernel," he heads all lists of the man most likely to be Prime Minister if black rule comes to South Africa.

Mr. Mandela, now 61 years old, will have been on Robben Island 16 years next month. Once described by a South African judge as "the leader and figurehead of his people," he was at his conviction in 1964 the top official of the African National Congress, the body that has led black resistance for most of this century. Its intensified campaign of urban guerrilla attacks is now creating new anxieties among whites.

Mr. Mandela, a lawyer, was one of nine defendants at the Rivonia trial, named for the suburb of Johannesburg where several of them were arrested. After months of testimony centering on Mr. Mandela's role as leader of the Spear of the Nation, a paramilitary offshoot of the African National Congress, eight of the nine, including Mr. Mandela, were convicted of treason and sabotage and sentenced to imprisonment for life.

Freedom Seems Remote

Sentences under South Africa's security laws are not subject to remission, and more than one justice minister has said that Mr. Mandela must expect to die in jail. From time to time some people outside the Government have urged that he be freed on conditions that would restrict his political activity, but he has passed the word that he would sooner remain where he is, uncompromised.

The latest bid to free him was begun three months ago. Percy Qoboza, editor of The Post, a black newspaper in Johannesburg, organized an appeal for the nationalist leader's release that attracted widespread support, not solely among blacks. In Cape Town and other major cities, whites put "Free Mandela" stickers on the bumpers of their cars, and several prominent Afrikaners, the Dutch-descended whites who control the Government, lent their backing.

The most surprising was Gen. Hendrik van den Bergh, who as chief of the Security Police played a personal role in Mr. Mandela's imprisonment. The general, who later founded and led the Bureau for State Security, an agency with a worldwide network of undercover agents, said from retirement that Mr. Mandela had "served his debt to society" and should be let go.

The Issue of Violence

Last week Helen Suzman, a member of the parliamentary opposition and a persistent critic of the Government, was permitted to visit Robben Island for talks with Mr. Mandela and other prisoners, a small sign that the Government attitude might be softening. But the formal position remains unchanged.

If the Government considered his release, it probably would attach a condition advocated by The Sunday Times of Johannesburg: that Mr. Mandela publicly forswear violence. But that is a



Pictorial Parade

Nelson R. Mandela, the black lead-

P.T.O

condition few nationalist leaders would accept when many blacks appear to have concluded that some form of coercion will be necessary to bring whites to the bargaining table.

African National Congress policy was demonstrated in January when three nationalist militants stormed a bank in the Pretoria suburb of Silverton and took more than 20 white hostages, demanding the release of Mr. Mandela and other nationalist leaders. Police sharpshooters infiltrated the bank and opened fire, killing all three raiders. Two white women died in the crossfire.

Mandela's Sources of Information

There is little doubt that Mr. Mandela learned of the raid. Like all those convicted under the security laws, he is denied access to newspapers, radio and television and is allowed to read other journals only after they have been carefully censored for political content. The censorship is rigorous; the nationalist leader told a visitor a few years ago that 20 articles were excised from one issue of Reader's Digest.

However, he has some approved contacts with the outside world. He is allowed two 30-minute visits a month from relatives; in recent years he has been seen regularly by his wife, Winnie, and two daughters. Occasionally there are other visitors, like Mrs. Suzman. In addition, the spate of political trials since the 1976 upheavals in Soweto and elsewhere have brought dozens of prisoners to the island with news of developments on the mainland.

Some black nationalists imagine Mr. Mandela escaping, but realities are against it. Although most guards are unarmed, the prison buildings are surrounded by twinned fences topped with barbed wire and floodlit at night, and more than three miles of chilly sea separate the island from the closest mainland. In the last known escape attempt, in 1963, a raft made of gasoline drums and planks foundered, drowning one of the prisoners. The survivor scrambled aboard a trawler and was returned to the island.

A Small Cell and Gardening

Mr. Mandela has a small cell to himself, with a bed, desk and bookshelf, three meals a day and access to a commissary where he can buy grocery and toilet items with pocket money earned from gardening in the prison compound.

For a decade after 1964 he worked with

other prisoners in the limestone quarries, a task that formed the basis for the Broadway play, "The Island," winner of two Tony awards in 1975. But doctors recommended that he be transferred to lighter work.

Part of the reason for his private cell is to limit his influence on other prisoners, all of whom are there for politically motivated offenses.

Sympathizers see Mr. Mandela and other nationalists imprisoned with him as a sort of Government-in-exile. Mrs. Mandela, returning from visits, has said that her husband is confident that he will come off the island one day. But his only recorded words on the subject were less exact. "On the island, we abound in hope," he told a visitor a few years ago. "I can say I have never had a single moment of depression because I know our cause will triumph."