

The Washington Post

AN INDEPENDENT NEWSPAPER

In South Africa's Prisons

NEWS OF street violence in South Africa commands attention, but less is known about the treatment of political detainees in that country. Recently, the Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights Under Law sponsored visits by a number of South Africans, some of whom have been in prison, to tell their stories to the American public.

A state of emergency has existed in South Africa since June 1986. Since then, an estimated 25,000 people have been arrested without charge and held for indefinite periods of time. The Lawyers' Committee South Africa Project, which for two decades has been providing American support for legal assistance to political prisoners in that country, has financed the defense of 1,000 of those arrested. Their individual stories are moving, and the overall picture they present is terrible. One witness after another told of surprise roundups, raids on homes, schools and work places, arrests without explanation. Some prisoners were tortured, others held in solitary confinement and all suffered the frightening uncertainty of indeterminate confinement.

The Lawyers' Committee estimates that 40 percent of those who have been arrested are under 18, and a few are as young as 8. Their families are not necessarily notified of their whereabouts, and once in custody, they are held with and subject to the same treatment as adults. They are not entitled to visits from parents, lawyers or independent doctors.

The political detention of youngsters is a particularly repulsive aspect of the crackdown in South Africa, but this kind of injustice is no less acceptable for adults. We are not talking about people who have been charged with and tried for crimes. These people have lost their liberty because of a speech, an opinion, a club membership. They are confined without charges or trial and are kept for as long as the police choose to keep them. South Africa is not the only place in the world where this happens, but it is a country where international pressures have some effect. Americans must continue to protest on behalf of those who have been silenced.