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ANC wins deal on political prisoners

By KATHLEEN BARNES in Durban and agencies

THE South African Government and the African National Congress reached agreement on the release of political prisoners yesterday, helping clear the way for talks on a multi-racial Constitution.

Later the ANC's president, Mr Oliver Tambo, opened the organisation's first national conference on South African soil since 1959 with a call to "seize the historic opportunity" for negotiations with the Government.

The stroke-crippled Mr Tambo told more than 2000 ANC delegates in the eastern port of Durban last night that the ANC's armed and political struggles, which had begun with his exile in 1960, had created these conditions.

The conference opened after a public opinion poll showed the ANC would win 62 per cent of black votes in a South African general election.

The Witwatersrand University survey of township opinion showed President De Klerk's ruling National Party would win 12 per cent support and the Zulu-based Inkatha Freedom Party, the ANC's main black rival, would win 5 per cent.

The deal on prisoners, if implemented, will allow President Bush to begin removing United States sanctions against South Africa.

President De Klerk said the Government and the ANC

himself that political prisoners have been released before he can lift sanctions imposed by the 1986 Comprehensive Anti-Apartheid Act.

Most other countries maintaining sanctions against South Africa are likely to follow suit if the US moves to relax its position.

The ANC conference in Durban throws into the international spotlight the leadership abilities of the organisation, which sees itself as the next Government of South Africa.

The ANC is deeply divided between the leadership of exiled members nurtured by the international anti-apartheid struggle and those who remained in South Africa, many of them in prison or underground.

Despite the ANC's insistence that this week's conference will consider far more broad-reaching issues than Friday's election of five top officers and 55 members of the committee, the shape of the ANC leadership could well be the shape of the future South Africa.

The much-revered Mr Tambo, 73, who suffered a stroke two years ago, is expected to enter a gracious retirement and accept a position as honorary president.

Last night he was helped to the podium by aides and he spoke falteringly. He broke down after speaking for almost 1½ hours and was helped back to his seat by his wife, Adelaide, and his aides. Delegates gathered in the sports

Leadership abilities

reached agreement "in terms of the process of release" in accordance with the terms of the Pretoria Minute thrashed out with the ANC last August.

The Justice Minister, Mr Kobie Coetsee, and representatives of the ANC's National Executive Committee agreed that "finality has now been reached" regarding political prisoners within South Africa, Mr De Klerk said in a statement released in Pretoria.

Scores of political prisoners are expected to be released in the next few days.

Mr De Klerk announced the Government had also decided to grant a one-third remission of sentence to all first offenders serving prison terms, with the exclusion of sex offenders and prisoners serving life terms.

Mr De Klerk also said the Government was confident the issue of prisoners in South Africa's four nominally independent black tribal homelands "could suitably be discussed among responsible parties".

The Government was prepared to play "an intermediary role" in this regard.

The number of political prisoners still being held in the four black homelands is estimated to be less than 200, according to an independent human rights watchdog body, the Human Rights Commission.

President Bush must satisfy

hall at the University of Durban-Westville campus burst into songs of praise as he sat down.

The deputy-president, Mr Nelson Mandela is expected to move easily into the presidency, a job he has carried out for the past 17 months since his release from prison.

But Mr Mandela may not have the executive committee and fellow officers he would like most to help him form a shadow Cabinet.

The once hotly contested deputy presidency is likely to go to Mr Walter Sisulu, 79, the leader of the international department, in a compromise move to avoid division between militants and moderates.

The important post of secretary-general is likely to go to Mr Cyril Ramaposa, the hard-line president of the National Union of Mine Workers.

Most of the faces on the committee are likely to be new ones with more militant attitudes towards the peace process. One local newspaper forecast that no more than four or five of the present 35 committee members will be re-elected.

Among the casualties is likely to be Mrs Winnie Mandela, whose recent conviction as an accessory to kidnapping and assault has embarrassed the ANC.

Mr Mandela told the conference last night that the ANC must be prepared to hold constitutional talks with the white-led Government "sooner rather than later".

The black majority still has no voting rights despite the end of apartheid laws.

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