

ANC Prepares for Consultative Conference

*A Newspaper
critiques
on ANC*

HOWARD BARRELL recently visited Lusaka, and interviewed ANC leaders. He outlines the debates and issues under discussion in the ANC as it prepares for its first consultative congress since 1969.

Conditions of underground struggle and exile do not favour debate - at least not of the kind conducted in liberal fashion. Security and a profile of unity can sometimes claim higher consideration. Conversely, debate is one of the vital foods of such a struggle. Without it, burning issues are smothered, and the fire of revolution can be doused.

This is a political and organisational contradiction that has long confronted revolutionary movements the world over - and the African National Congress is no exception. It is a problem with which the ANC is currently grappling as it prepares for its second consultative conference since it was outlawed in 1960.

Indications are that powerful leadership elements, supported by ANC president Oliver Tambo, are determined to have 'open season' declared: that there should be absolutely free and open debate both in the current preparations for the conference and at the conference itself. Among the rank and file, there is discernible excitement at the prospect of a conference at which their voices will be heard much more loudly than usual on several pressing issues.

Once the congress is over, however, members of the ANC will be bound to implement the decisions and policy positions reached.

ANC sources say scores of position papers and recommendations are being received from underground units inside the country. In exile, different units in ANC structures are themselves holding discussions and forwarding position papers.

These are being combined by a consultative conference national preparatory committee, and an agenda is being developed from them. This preparatory stage is viewed as most important by ANC members - the period that will largely determine the success of the conference.

The consultative conference looks set to last two to three days, and between 100 and 200 delegates are likely to attend. More than one timing and place has already been fed to journalists. This is beginning to look increasingly like a disinformation exercise motivated by ANC security considerations.

MOROGORO'S LEGACY

Whereas the last consultative conference - at Morogoro in Tanzania in 1969 - took place in a situation of crisis for the ANC, the general feeling among ANC sources is that this year's conference comes at a time of considerable advance.

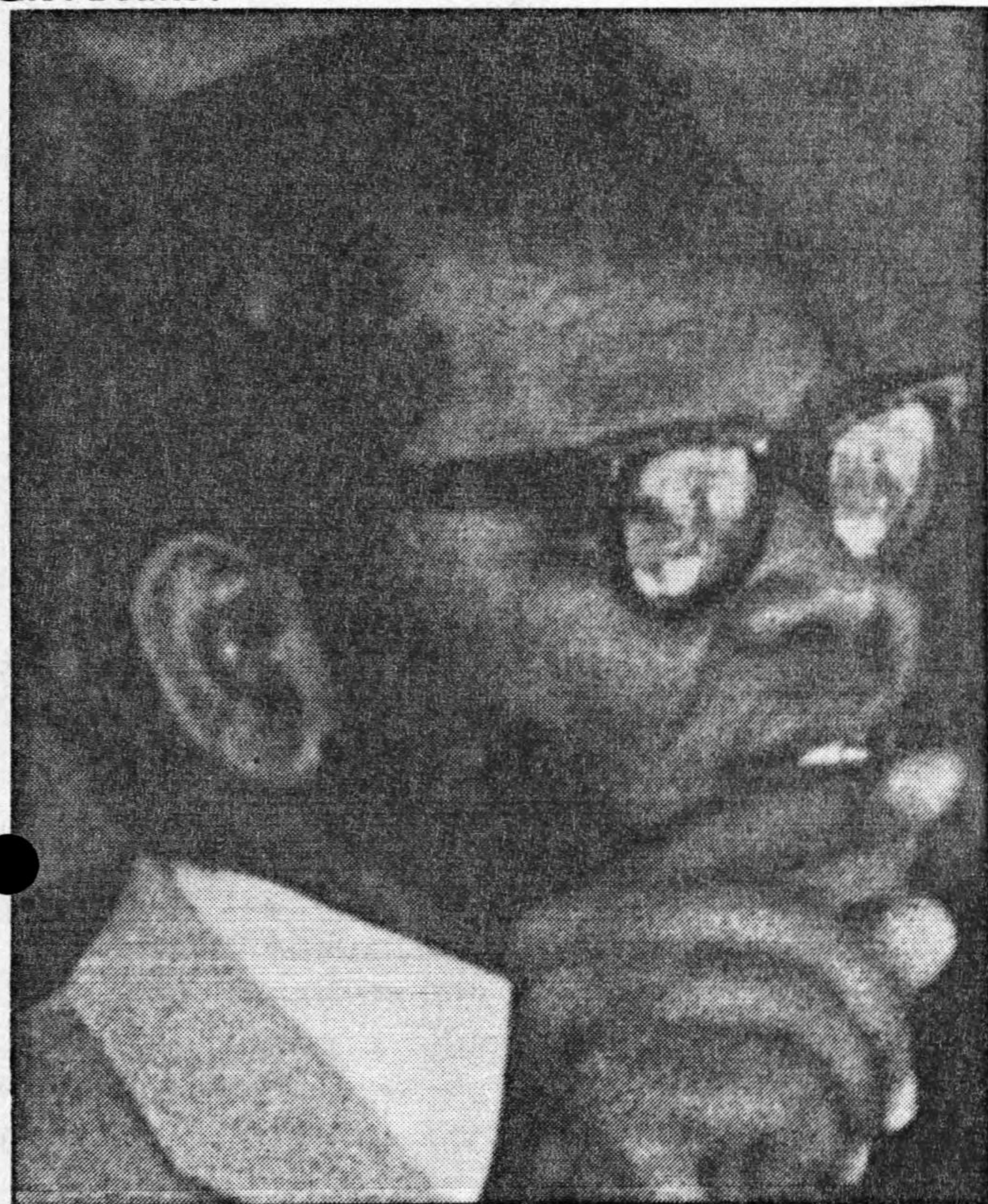
Over the past 24 years, the ANC has divided its struggle into four broad areas: the development and extension of the ANC underground machinery inside the country and its overall generalship; the legal mass mobilisation of people politically and economically inside the country; the development of armed struggle; and the international isolation of the apartheid government.

A set of distinctly organisational issues - such as whether or not to open up the ranks of the National Executive

Committee (NEC) to non-Africans for the first time, and whether or not to allow non-Africans to now become members of the domestic ANC - do not seem likely to cause problems of any significance.

Of course, these issues again raise some (old and largely settled) debates around the 'national question', on the advisability of racial groups having separately structured organisations to oppose the different levels of oppression faced by each. But all indications are that delegates will want to extend full formal organisational rights to proven coloured, Indian and white members.

The ANC's 1969 Morogoro consultative conference decided that coloureds, Indians and whites could belong to the External Mission of the ANC but not to the domestic ANC. It also continues to restrict membership of the NEC to Africans.



Oliver Tambo - 'leadership unassailable'

The Morogoro decisions were constitutional technicalities in deference to the many ANC leaders then in jail and underground. It had not been possible to fully canvass their views. When the issue of opening up the ANC to non-Africans had come before the full NEC in 1959, while the ANC was still legal, it had been decided then that the time was not yet right for such a move.

But the feeling at Morogoro was that the argument for building a completely

non-racial ANC, embodying all elements of the old Congress Alliance, was politically compelling. And, at a practical level, it made no sense having small groups of exiles representing the South African Indian Congress, the Coloured People's Congress and the Congress of Democrats working separately. Solidarity between these organisations, the feeling was, should be transformed as best as then could be into organisational unity.

The Morogoro conference restricted itself largely to decisions it could readily take in the name of the **External Mission** of the ANC. It allowed coloured, Indian and white membership of the External Mission, and it set up operational and other structures - notably the now-disbanded Revolutionary Council - which comprised all races and which was sometimes authorised to take decisions in the name of the NEC.

When new operational structures replaced the Revolutionary Council in early 1983, this non-racialism was consolidated. Political trials in recent years have shown that the constitutional bar on non-Africans being members of the domestic ANC has also been honoured more in the breach than in the observance.

There appears to be a strong majority view, from Tambo down, that the ANC must now correct this constitutional anomaly; that the ANC must reflect fully within its own structures the non-racial goals it espouses.

But, with these changes could come the demand that more coloureds, Indians and whites make their way into Umkhonto we Sizwe.

NEC ELECTIONS

New elections are to be held for the NEC, and there are signs that more youth could be promoted onto the executive. The younger members of the NEC currently include Thabo Mbeki, publicity director and son of imprisoned former ANC and SACP leader Govan Mbeki; Chris Hani, political commissar of Umkhonto we Sizwe and formerly Lesotho ANC representative; Joe Jele, a senior official in the political department who used to head the ANC's international department; Simon Makana; and Joe Nhlanhla, former administrative secretary of the ANC.

The presidency of Tambo, who enjoys a

remarkable degree of respect and affection from ANC members of all ranks and ideological emphases, is unassailable.

Some changes to structures are also likely. The emphasis in this respect will be towards making more effective the structures dealing with the home front and increasing co-ordination between them. It is possible these changes could reach up to the NEC.

ANC exiles talk with some pride of an 'outstanding group of middle-ranking leaders' emerging, and authorised spokesmen say a substantial number of young men and women who have left the country since the 1976 uprising have already taken up responsible positions, particularly in Umkhonto we Sizwe.

The conference is likely to re-assert the correctness of overall ANC strategy. Some areas and methods will, however, be more closely examined.

THE MAIN DEBATES

The hot debates for the conference are over armed struggle and the extension of the underground. And cooler, though searching, debate is raging over the need, and the way in which, to establish much more firmly the leadership role of the working class first formulated at Morogoro in 1969.

On the issue of armed struggle, the period 1976-1984 is, correctly, being termed a stage of 'armed propaganda'. That is, a period in which the ANC has sought to show that armed struggle is feasible under South African conditions.

But there are signs of new directions emerging in line with the ANC's declared intention to mount 'people's war'. Loosely, that is a situation in which the ANC hopes every one of its supporters, and others, becomes a 'fighter'.

One new direction seems likely to be the more distinct combination of armed struggle with political or labour mass actions. There have already been several halting moves in this direction - such as the attacks on Sigma and Leyland showrooms during labour disputes with these companies, and attacks on Department of Education and Training offices during student boycotts. But the pattern of linkage could now become much more direct.

Top ANC sources have also disclosed that Umkhonto we Sizwe fighters could be allowed to exercise much less caution about incurring civilian casualties. Some shift towards softer targets (a broad category) looks definite - and they are unlikely to be black (apart from those whom the ANC designates 'enemies of the people'). But the ANC has said that the military escalation it plans will not be directed 'specifically against any civilians'. Certainly, the established preference for sabotage of installations looks set to become a thing of the past.

Of course, the anti-ANC security pacts the South African government signed with FRELIMO and the Swazi ruling group have presented the ANC military with logistical problems. But guerilla attack statistics show there is no reason to believe these problems have been anything like as serious as the government might have hoped they would be. And the ANC considers armed struggle still to be a viable and vital weapon in its armoury. The conference is likely to state that position unequivocally. With at least 7 000 formally trained guerillas (this is the only estimate competent ANC sources will give), the ANC considers it has the trunk of a people's army from which many branches can grow.

But the pacts necessitate that the ANC develops a capacity to sustain armed struggle inside South Africa with far less reliance on routes through, and resources within, neighbouring states. From its perspective, its guerillas have to be rooted more firmly among ordinary people willing and able to provide them with shelter and intelligence. And that is where the ANC's concern about the state of its underground comes in.

INTERNAL STRUCTURES

From Tambo down, there is a feeling that the ANC internal underground has not been operating well enough, nor is it sufficiently extensive.

The ways and means of improving it will be thoroughly discussed at the consultative conference. In fact, this issue will likely be the lens through which most other problems are viewed. The ANC holds that success in almost all areas of its struggle depends on sound

and extensive internal underground structures more than on any other single factor. What appears to be considerable support for the ANC inside South Africa must, from the ANC's perspective, be transformed in appropriate cases into underground structures.

The ANC has declared 1985 'The Year of the Cadre', as if to drive home its intentions in this regard. Clearly, it will be seeking to step up the development of a disciplined cadre operating under the co-ordination of a centralised leadership. Closer definition of the primary position of the working class and its interests also has structural and organisational ramifications. And it will be interesting to see how the ANC deals with the role of the working class in the national liberation struggle.

At the level of argument, the debates among ANC exiles mirror almost exactly those which have raged internally over the past two years. One difference is the way in which the debates outside are conducted. Protagonists of the different positions appear more confident. There is less, if any, recourse to perjoratives like 'workerist' and 'populist'; and different positions adopted around the degree and form that working class leadership should take are seen as dialectical (and hence positive within the traditionally broad politics of a liberation movement structure) rather than contradictory (and hence a basis for disunity).

THE WORKING CLASS

Sources say it is highly likely the consultative conference will consolidate and further elaborate the ANC's view, first clearly indicated in 1969, that the (black) working class is the motive force of its national liberation struggle. This will confirm an ongoing swing to the left which is as discernible within the ANC as it is among mass organisations operating legally inside the country.

One area in which the nature of working class leadership is being debated is in the composition of Umkhonto we Sizwe. Currently, by all accounts, it is made up mainly of young black men and women (largely from working class origins) who left South

Africa after 1976. Some people argue for a greater and more distinctive working class 'being' in the army. And the principle of working class primacy also has implications for the linkage of armed struggle to struggles waged distinctively by the working class.

Although the ANC appears well pleased with progress made over the past two years, in particular in legal mass political and labour mobilisation, it will be looking at ways of building on the successes scored. From its point of view, organisation of the unemployed and of people in the rural areas has lagged badly, and it will be making plans in these two areas.

Over the past 24 years, ANC External Mission diplomats have played a major role in efforts to isolate the apartheid government internationally. The international balance of forces and how this relates to the issue of apartheid is seen as an important factor. And the ANC is pleased with progress thus far.

The ANC currently sees particular international significance in the 'Free South Africa' campaign being waged in the United States. And it was in this context that it recently held talks with Senator Edward Kennedy. Adding Kennedy's political clout to the campaign against the Reagan administration's 'constructive engagement' with apartheid is the prize ANC diplomats wanted out of the meeting. And it seems they have got it.

The ANC's view of the small anti-Kennedy boycotts organised by AZAPO is that these displayed a disappointing immaturity and a dismal lack of understanding of the tactics of the international struggle against apartheid. While an anti-apartheid stance can be a convenient (and it can also be a sincere) political plank for a wide range of political outlooks, the point as far as the ANC is concerned is to reduce the foes and multiply the friends of the liberation struggle. For ANC diplomats, the bottom line is at very least to neutralise potential enemies.

In the ANC's view, to campaign in international forums in this way does not mean to surrender the definition of the objectives and character of its struggle to sincere (or opportunistic) foreigners. Nor does it mean conferring upon a foreigner the mantle of liberator. Instead, in the ANC's view, anyone seriously working for an end to apartheid in all its forms can remain

confident that the definition and ultimate onus of the struggle remains the South African people's. The rest is a very basic question of tactics.

THE TACTICS OF TALKS

In history, the moment comes for almost every revolutionary movement at some time to talk to its adversary - if only to find out what contradictions within the enemy's camp are prompting the enemy to want to talk.

Calls for government - ANC talks by assorted white businessmen and members of the Afrikaner intelligentsia have aroused much analysis and debate as to motive within the ANC's External Mission.

The general view is that these calls for talks indicate one or a combination of the following: that these white elements consider that the new constitution and the black response show the Botha government is incapable of developing political options able to safeguard their interests; that these whites believe the ANC is in a position of comparative weakness after the Nkomati Accord, and that therefore now is the time to talk; that these whites recognise that, whatever the socialist rhetoric of the Mugabe government, the Lancaster House Agreement guaranteed Zimbabwe would be a capitalist haven for years to come, and a similar pre-emptive agreement with the ANC might, given the balance of forces, guarantee them a similar future for South Africa.

The fact is - and it is a fact - there have been no talks, negotiations, contacts or diplomatic exchanges of any kind between the ANC and the South African government over the past year, according to a wide range of official and unofficial ANC sources and contacts from the top down. Why at least one journalist should have claimed otherwise is cause for speculation only at this stage.

What has happened is that Professor Harvey van der Merwe of UCT and Beeld journalist Piet Muller have visited Lusaka and had discussions with individual ANC members on the ANC's perspectives. Van der Merwe visited as an individual interested in seeing government - ANC talks, and Muller apparently with the same motive in the

role of a journalist. At most, these visits might be termed 'preliminary reconnaissance' by individuals or small groups interested in a more radical version of what is termed 'peaceful change' to establish if there is a segment of pro-talkers within the ANC.

The clear indications are that, if a National Party MP (such as Wynand Malan) visited Lusaka as an individual and sought informal discussions with individual members of the ANC on ANC perspectives, the ANC leadership would not stand in his way. But, the ANC would not be prepared to meet him as a representative of the National Party, the ANC would not consider itself bound in any way by such informal discussions, nor would the ANC consider such a chat as constituting any formal or informal contact with the government or ruling party.

'We have a Department of Information and Publicity (DIP), and they can meet anybody - that's their job,' one ANC source said.

As far as the issue of formal ANC - government talks goes, authorised ANC spokesmen have laid down two broad conditions: one, that the talks be premised on an agreement that apartheid must be completely dismantled and that they centre on the practical ways and means of constructing a united, democratic and non-racial country; and two, that the ANC have the agreement of the 'entire democratic leadership of South Africa' to such talks and is able to call on some jailed or detained leaders, as well as people not in the ANC, to help it exercise its mandate in such talks.

These ANC spokesmen have added the ANC will not allow the fact of talks with the government to remain a secret from its base.

The ANC recognises that the anxious voices calling for government - ANC talks represent an important class-derived hairline crack in the white bloc. Like any other revolutionary movement, the ANC must pay some attention to worsening any contradictions and creating disarray within the ranks of what can be termed 'the generalised enemy'. The best way for it to do so is, obviously, to substantially increase its offensive. That thrust is the subject of the consultative conference - from its perspective, talks are not on the agenda for now.