

Build moral pressure to end the occupation

Desmond Tutu -- Friday, June 14, 2002

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WASHINGTON The end of apartheid stands as one of the crowning accomplishments of the last century, but we would not have succeeded without the help of international pressure. There is no greater testament to the basic dignity of ordinary people everywhere than the divestment movement of the 1980s. A similar movement has taken shape recently, this time aiming at an end to the Israeli occupation of Palestinian territories. We should hope that average citizens again rise to the occasion, since the obstacles to a renewed movement are surpassed only by its moral urgency.

Divestment from apartheid South Africa was fought at the grass roots. Religious leaders informed their followers, union members pressured their stockholders and consumers questioned their store-owners. Students played an especially important role by compelling universities to change their portfolios. Eventually, institutions pulled the financial plug, and the South African government thought twice about its policies.

Moral and financial pressure is again being mustered one person at a time. In the United States, students at more than 40 campuses are demanding a review of university investments. Europe faces efforts ranging from consumer boycotts to arms embargoes. These tactics are not the only parallels to the struggle against apartheid South Africa. Yesterday's township dwellers can tell you about today's life in the occupied territories. To travel only a few blocks in his own homeland, an elderly grandfather waits to beg for the whim of a teenage soldier. More than an emergency is required to get to a hospital; less than a crime earns a trip to jail.

The lucky ones have a permit to leave their squalor to work in the cities, but luck runs out when security closes all checkpoints, paralyzing an entire people. The indignities, dependence and anger are all too familiar. I am not the first South African to recognize the chilly reminder of what we just left. Ronnie Kasrils and Max Ozinsky, two Jewish heroes of the anti-apartheid struggle, recently published a letter titled "Not in My Name." Signed by several hundred other prominent Jewish South Africans, the letter drew an explicit analogy between apartheid and current Israeli policies.

The writer Mark Mathabane and former President Nelson Mandela have also pointed out the relevance of the South African experience to the current conflict. To criticize the occupation is not to overlook Israel's unique strengths, just as protesting the Vietnam War did not imply ignoring the distinct freedoms and humanitarian

accomplishments of the United States. In a region where repressive governments and unjust policies are the norm, Israel is certainly more democratic than most of its neighbors. This does not make dismantling the settlements any less of a priority.

Divestment from apartheid South Africa was certainly no less justified even though there was repression elsewhere on the African continent. Aggression is no more palatable at the hands of a democratic power. Territorial ambition is equally illegal whether it occurs in slow motion, as with the Israeli settlers in the occupied territories, or in blitzkrieg fashion, as with the Iraqi tanks in Kuwait.

Almost instinctively, the Jewish people have always been on the side of the voiceless. In their history, there is painful memory of massive round-ups, house demolitions and collective punishment. In their scripture, there is acute empathy for the disenfranchised. The occupation represents a dangerous and selective amnesia of the persecution from which these traditions were born.

Not everyone has forgotten, including some within the military. The growing Israeli refusenik movement evokes the small anti-conscription drive which helped turn the tide in apartheid South Africa. Several hundred decorated Israeli officers have refused to perform military service in the occupied territories. Those individuals not already in prison have taken their message on the road to U.S. synagogues and campuses, rightly arguing that Israel needs security, but it will never have it as an occupying power.

More than 35 new settlements have been constructed this year. Each one is a step away from the safety deserved by the Israelis, and two steps away from the justice owed to the Palestinians. If apartheid ended, so can the occupation, but the moral force and international pressure will have to be just as determined. The current divestment effort is the first, though certainly not the only, necessary move in that direction.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu, who was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1984 for his work against apartheid, contributed this comment to the International Herald Tribune. It was written in collaboration with Ian Urbina, associate editor of the Middle East Report, Washington.
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