

THE UNIVERSAL HOUSE OF JUSTICE

DEPARTMENT OF THE SECRETARIAT

12 October 1986

To all National Spiritual Assemblies

Dear Bahá'í Friends,

The above statement which was sent to you with our covering letter of 21 February 1986 has been revised by the Office of Public Information and approved by the Universal House of Justice. At the direction of the House of Justice, we enclose a copy of the revised statement, which supersedes the previous one.

With loving Bahá'í greetings,

Department of the Secretariat

Apartheid: A Bahá'í View

A little more than a hundred years ago, Bahá'u'lláh, Founder of the Bahá'í Faith, declared that mankind was entering upon a new era in its history when accelerating processes of unification would soon compel universal recognition that humanity is one single race, one distinct species. He appealed to the peoples of the world to accept this central truth and to set aside the barriers of race, nationality, and culture which have been principal causes of war throughout history. There is, He said, no possibility of achievement of world peace until the fundamental principle of unity has been accepted and given practical effect in the organization of society.

Consequently, from the time of its inception more than a century ago, the Bahá'í world community has been characterized by the integration of the many religious, racial, ethnic, cultural, linguistic and national elements which it comprises. Marriage between persons of different ethnic, and cultural backgrounds, and particularly between black and white Bahá'ís, is warmly encouraged in the Bahá'í scriptures. In order to make certain that those members who suffer discrimination in society as a whole are not prevented from full participation in the life of the community, the Bahá'í teachings contain certain administrative principles which are designed to overcome the handicaps created by social inequalities. For example, where a tie vote has been cast in a Bahá'í community election or where two or more believers are equally qualified for a particular office, priority is given as a matter of principle to the one representing the disadvantaged or oppressed sector of society.

It is these principles which have guided the Bahá'ís in South Africa since the opening years of this century. When the apartheid laws made it illegal for certain local groups, including elected Bahá'í Spiritual Assemblies, to contain members from different racial backgrounds, it was the white Bahá'ís who surrendered the privilege of elected membership so that the principle of giving priority to disadvantaged segments of society could continue to prevail. Except for these local decision-making bodies whose membership was explicitly limited by civil law, Bahá'í meetings in South Africa have been racially integrated, a fact well known to the civil authorities.

Beyond attempting to provide an encouraging example of racial integration, the Bahá'í community in South Africa has devoted much of its energy to the inculcation of Bahá'í principles related to the oneness of mankind and on the development of a sense of self-worth and of social responsibility in the individual. Parallel with these activities has been a program aimed at training Spiritual Assemblies in principles of consultation and problem-solving. Bahá'ís are particularly

proud of the results of this effort because through it black believers have assumed the highest elective and appointive offices in the community.

This historical background points up the Bahá'í conviction that solutions to situations such as that which prevails in South Africa must draw on the force of example. Fundamental changes in social attitude will be most readily achieved if the relevant spiritual and moral principles are courageously set forth and if men and women of good will can see others attempting successfully to give these ideals practical expression in individual and community life.

Violating as it does the very honor of humanity, the system of apartheid arouses in peoples of all nations and cultures deep feelings of abhorrence. Bahá'ís share these feelings particularly keenly. The moral challenge which the situation represents, however, has now become intertwined with partisan political concerns. So complete is this interrelationship that the issues in the conflict are inextricable from one another: social protest originating in moral outrage has assumed the character of political action.

It is natural that it should do so, given the adversary principle that characterizes our political traditions throughout the world. But political action, in the absence of conditions for genuine consultation, in which partisan interests are subordinated to the interests of the whole, will not itself bring an enduring resolution of problems as serious as those convulsing South Africa. However difficult the task and however disheartening the present situation may seem, segments of South African society who believe full integration to be the fundamental issue face the challenge of focusing their efforts on creating such conditions. This is a moral imperative as urgent as any other motivating peoples of good will who seek to free South Africa from its terrible burden.

Bahá'ís are required by the teachings of their Faith to refrain from involvement in partisan political activity and civil disorder. This is true whether such activity is a response to racial oppression, as is generally the case in South Africa, or to more widespread attempts to keep people divided and vulnerable such as the persecution of religious belief, the suppression of women, or the denial of political freedom. The hard-won experience of Bahá'ís under all these conditions convinces them beyond any doubt that humanity can learn to live as one family and that all the forces of contemporary history are rapidly impelling the race in this direction. The pressure of these forces is inescapable; eventually even South Africa will respond. The quality of that response, and its speed, will depend as much on spiritual and moral conditions as it will on economic and political ones.