AMERICAN JEWS & SOUTH AFRICA

'Waiving' goodbye to sanctions?

Jewish groups are hearing from both sides as pressure builds to 'reward' Pretoria

By Yosef Abramowitz
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NEW YORK — Nineteen eighty-seven. Just released from a year of administrative detention, the 28-year-old Bheki led me through the squatted shantytown of the Chicken Farm - a destitute part of Soweto, named perhaps in the hope that one day its residents will have the freedom and resources to raise chickens. Food smoke billowed from large tin cans in front of card board and sheet metal huts. The dark must indus the air just above the ground. So that the drawn faces of the children running by quickened faded from view.

They claim if there are sanctions, we will suffer. I asked. "But ok by the intense gaze focused on a woman surrounded by children scurrying by the side of a dirt road selling rotten fruit. We suffer already. Sanctions will not make us hungry. We are already hungry.

After introducing me to several young mothers who had not seen their migrant workers husbands for months, Bheki took me aside. "Tell the Jewish people that we need sanctions. Tell your people that we are grateful for sanctions. Only outside influence will move this government to end this injustice. Sanctions must be maintained until there is change. They must get this message."

Marsha Goldstone: 'There will be some split in the American Jewish community.'

Five years ago the American Jewish community stood behind people like Bheki and campaigned for sanctions against South Africa, over the objections of Ronald Reagan's veto and the failed policy of "constructive engagement." It was easy then. Arrests were rampant, government violence was widespread. A state of emergency was in effect. The world was outraged.

Five years later the winds of change have unranked South Africa's political leaders. A new president, F.W. de Klerk, has been elected. Nelson Mandela, the leader of the African National Congress, has been freed. The international community is taking notice. The American Jewish community is going to make a decision on the principles and merits just as it did before. But even after the wind of change has died down, sanctions must be maintained.

American Jews constitute a significant and identifiable bloc of whites in the sanctions movement. Jewish organizations mobilized support for congressional sanctions; Jewish leaders were arrested for demonstrating at the South African embassy; and Jewish students organized marches for divestment. Jewish members of Congress voted to override Reagan's veto of sanctions by higher margins than their non-Jewish white colleagues.

"The American Jewish community is going to make a community relations organization..." activist describes as a "wake-up call." American Jews constitute a significant and identifiable bloc of whites in the sanctions movement. Jewish organizations mobilized support for congressional sanctions; Jewish leaders were arrested for demonstrating at the South African embassy; and Jewish student organizations marched for divestment. Jewish members of Congress voted to override Reagan's veto of sanctions by higher margins than their non-Jewish white colleagues.

President Bush can waive the sanctions if the South African government meets five conditions: repeal the state of emergency; lift the ban on political organizations and parties; return the segregationist Group Areas Act of 1949; release all political prisoners; and agree to enter into good-faith negotiations with black leaders.

The release of ANC leader Nelson Mandela last year, was the first in a steady stream of events and pronouncements that encouraged high hopes. "Yes, we expect Bush to waive sanctions," says Patrick Evans, spokesman for the embassy of the Republic of South Africa. "President Bush has made it clear that he will not allow any reinterpretation of the conditions, nor will he allow any shifting of the goals." Evans claims that with release of political prisoners, South Africa will have met all five conditions under the CAAA.

The president might reject "shifting of the goals," but he is not likely to waive sanctions unilaterally. According to a State Department official familiar with the issue, the president told de Klerk and Mandela when each visited the White House that there are certain rules and laws that we must follow concerning the CAAA. When those laws have been adhered to, then the administration would move on the consideration of lifting sanctions in consultation with Congress.

The South African diplomats concede there are elements in Congress and around the country opposed to lifting the sanctions soon, but he believes "their bark is worse than their bite." The issue, as it is perceived in the Jewish community, can best be described not as a bite or bark, but as a growl that will continue to intensify as the South African government approaches meeting the five conditions of the CAAA.

"I think sanctions should be continued until blacks, everybody..."