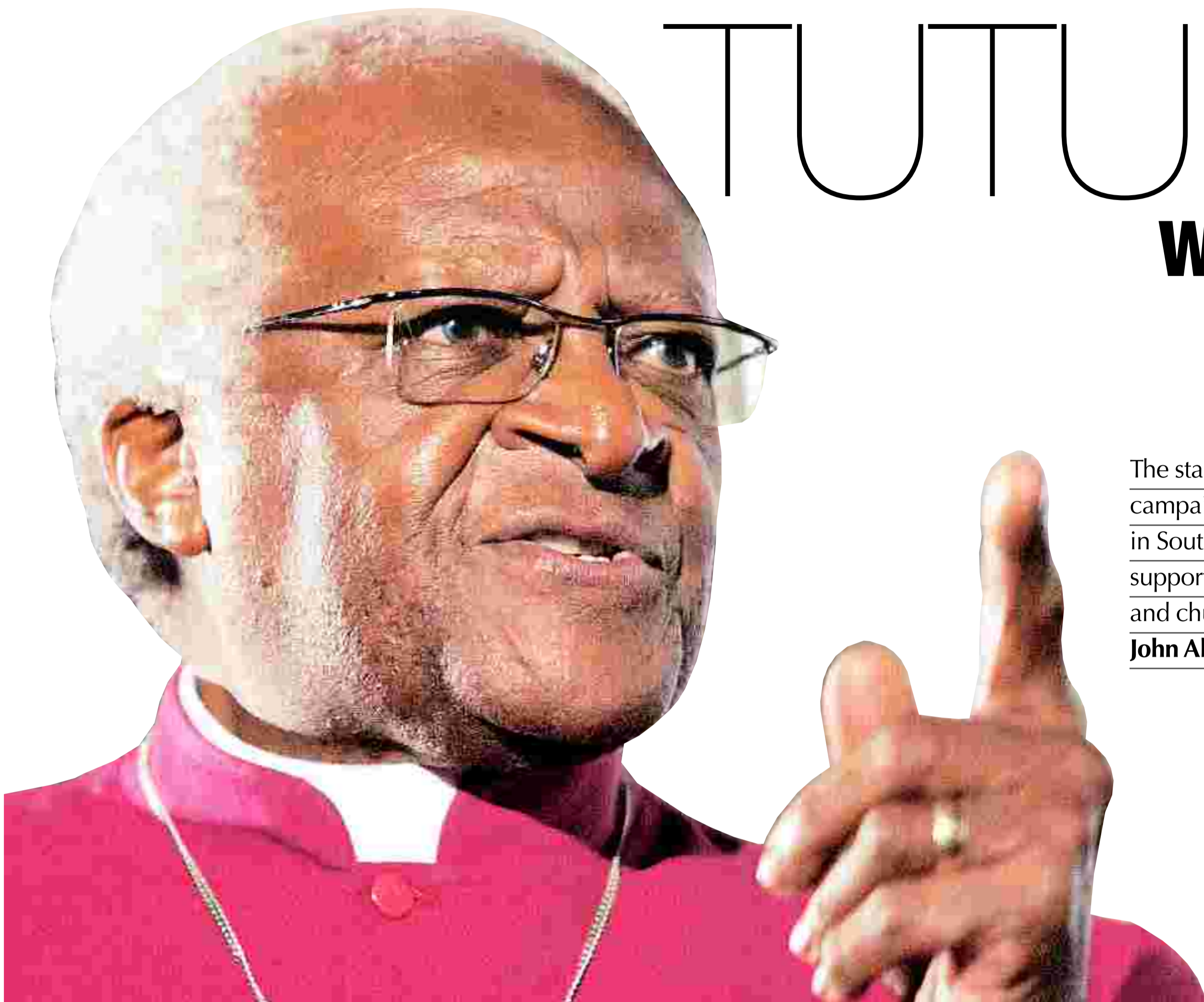


# TUTU'S WRATH

The start of Desmond's campaign for change in South Africa was supported by his family and church, writes

John Allen



Nobel prize laureate Archbishop Desmond Tutu speaks at the 10th anniversary of the country's Truth and Reconciliation Commission in Cape Town on 20 April, 2006. Tutu chaired the commission that investigated apartheid crimes.

Photograph: Howard Burditt/Reuters

**D**esmond Tutu became executive head of the South African Council of Churches (SACC) in March 1978. Although the government had by then suppressed the uprisings which began in 1976, it would never regain the measure of control it had imposed after Sharpeville. About 4 000 young people went into exile in the eighteen months after June 16. Most of the 3 000 who joined the ANC – the largest number of recruits it had ever received – went for military training.

In the weeks following June 16, a group of ANC activists recently released from Robben Island prison began, clandestinely, to advise some of the student leaders. In October 1976 a unit of the ANC's army, Umkhonto weSizwe (MK), infiltrated South Africa through Mozambique, now liberated, and Swaziland. A young MK commander named Mosima "Tokyo" Sexwale inflicted the first injuries on government forces when he threw a hand grenade at police during an attempt to enter South Africa from Swaziland in November 1976. As recruits returned from training in 1977, MK stepped up its attacks.

The month Tutu moved to the SACC, Barbara Waite, formerly a member of his congregation at St Mary's Cathedral in Johannesburg, gave South Africa a graphic portrayal of the consequences of forced removals. In a three-year project which began on her dining room table, Waite comprehensively plotted forced population removals. She used the information to draw a map of South Africa, covered with clusters of arrows and detailed annotations, which provided the first consolidated picture of the effects of governmental engineering.

The map was published by the Black Sash. Other members of the Sash compiled estimates showing that 2.1-million people had already been removed, and 1.7-million still faced removal. In a visit to the Ciskei at the end of June 1979, Tutu toured one of the places to which people had been removed. A conversation which lasted a few seconds was burned into his mind, and he was to repeat it in almost exactly the same words for years afterwards:

"In Zweledinga I met this little girl who lives with her widowed mother and sister. I asked whether her mother received a pension or any other grant and she said, 'No.' "Then how do you live?" I asked. "We borrow food," she said.

**I will always be haunted by that little girl and I pledge myself to do all I can to see an end to what I believe to be utterly diabolical and unacceptable to the Christian conscience...**

"Have you ever returned the food you have borrowed?"

"No."

"What happens if you can't borrow food?"

"We drink water to fill our stomachs."

Back in Johannesburg, Tutu decided to write to PW Botha, who had just replaced John Vorster as the new prime minister. Botha had come to power proclaiming reform. He appointed a member of the verligte wing of his party, Piet Koornhof, to take over the old bantustan administration and development (BAD) department.

Tutu's letter was to be the first in a series of impassioned private appeals – revealed in this biography for the first time – in the style of his 1976 letter to Vorster ahead of the Soweto uprising which warned of impending catastrophe. Tutu opened by addressing himself to Botha as a fellow Christian. He continued:

"I believe that you are unaware of the conditions that shattered me during my visit to the Eastern Cape. I am convinced that if you knew what the consequences of the massive population resettlement schemes have been on your fellow human beings and your fellow South Africans, then you and your colleagues in the Nationalist Party would long ago have called a halt to something with such distressing results..."

"I must be careful not to use emotive language but, Mr Prime Minister, I cannot avoid speaking about the dumping of people as if they were things with little prior consultation about how they felt... I cannot see how such treatment is consistent with the Gospel of Jesus Christ who said, 'In as much as you did not do it to the least of these my brethren you did it not unto me.' † Matthew 25:40.

"I am trying to be as restrained as possible because I want to confess to you that at this moment as I write I am deeply agitated and angered by what I have seen..."

"I do not think you know that women sweep the streets of Sada for R6 a month... that an old man in Glenmore could earn

R2.50 a day near his old home and now must pay R6.50 for the return journey to the same place... I do not think you know of the little girl in Zweledinga who said she and her mother and sister lived on borrowed food and if they could not borrow food they drank water to fill their stomachs, this in a country that exports food..."

"I will always be haunted by that little girl and I pledge myself to do all I can to see an end to what I believe to be utterly diabolical and unacceptable to the Christian conscience... The Afrikaner has found it difficult to forget the concentration camps in which some of his forebears were incarcerated by the British. Black memories of the resettlement camps and villages may be equally indelible."

Botha's mother had been confined in a British concentration camp in the Anglo-Boer War, but he was unmoved by Tutu's plea. It was not government policy to "dump" people, he replied. He outlined the legal process involved in removals, and added: "Although it is conceded that the removal of people from established places of abode may cause inconvenience in some cases, the ultimate advantages far outweigh the initial disadvantages."

Tutu's anger boiled over even before he saw Botha's reply. Visiting European donor agencies, he told a Danish television interviewer that it was "rather disgraceful" that Denmark was buying South African coal. Told that black workers would lose their jobs if coal exports were ended, Tutu said the suffering would be temporary: "It would be suffering with a purpose. We would not be doing what is happening now, where blacks are suffering, and it seems to be a suffering that is going to go on and on and on."

There was uproar at home. Botha's interior minister, Alwyn Schlebusch, said he was "disgusted". The president of the Methodist Church said Tutu was speaking without a mandate. Right-wing Anglicans called on their leaders to distance themselves from Tutu. The archbishop, Bill Burnett, privately disagreed with Tutu but

said nothing in public.

Johannesburg's bishop, Timothy Bavin, disagreed publicly but said that many people agreed with Tutu and rejected appeals to discipline him: "He is a man of deep prayer and living faith and spends more time on his knees than most of those who call for action to be taken by the Church against him".

American diplomats reported to Washington that Tutu's views were widely shared by urban black leaders but were rarely aired: "Tutu is risking prosecution or banning under South Africa's security laws by advocating international boycott action. His remarks are more likely however to result in a campaign of police and press harassment of the SACC".

The prediction proved accurate. Schlebusch, who was responsible for issuing passports, summoned Tutu to a meeting in Pretoria. In what Tutu later came to suspect was part of a "good cop, bad cop" routine, Botha's cabinet decided that Koornhof should join the meeting.

Koornhof had in preceding months prevailed a number of communities facing forced removal and had tried – without success – to persuade Tutu to join a government committee discussing policy towards black people living in urban areas. He had followed up with confidential talks – once at his home – with Tutu; the SACC's president, Sam Buti; and other black leaders. During an eighty-minute meeting between Tutu and the two ministers early in October 1979, Schlebusch produced a transcript of Tutu's interview with the Danish reporter. He said that Tutu was guilty of economic sabotage and pressed him to retract or apologise. Tutu responded that economic pressure was necessary to bring about fundamental change. Koornhof kept interrupting, accusing Tutu of being inconsistent by both pursuing dialogue and urging sanctions.

At the end, Tutu said he wanted to talk to his family and the SACC's leaders before giving a final response. Two days later the government widened its assault. The police minister, Louis le Grange, warned the SACC to desist from irresponsible actions. Leftist spiritual leaders, he said, were conditioning blacks to believe that the existing order was unchristian and immoral, that their human rights were being denied, that they were being oppressed and exploited, and their human dignity was being infringed on.

Church leaders and the SACC executive committee met the following week in an

atmosphere of crisis. They were at one in rejecting Le Grange's accusations. On sanctions, they were divided. Defending his unmandated statement, Tutu said that he was committed to work for reasonably peaceful change – "reasonably" because there had already been so much violence.

If fundamental change did not happen soon, however, there would be a bloodbath. He applauded Botha's reforms, such as recognition of black trade unions. But they would allow privileges only for black workers who qualified under the pass laws to live in urban areas. The overwhelming majority of black South Africans would lose their citizenship and be liable to dumping in the Bantustans.

It was essential, he said, to search for non-violent strategies to force fundamental change, including political and economic pressure from the international community. He asked his opponents to suggest alternatives which would be effective.

After some debate, the Methodist leader, Peter Storey, who chaired the meeting in the absence of SACC president Sam Buti, developed a consensus position which was adopted by the meeting: in the tradition of the Old Testament prophets, Tutu had a right to express his views as a matter of personal conscience, notwithstanding differences of opinion in the churches.

The real issue, Storey said, was the need for fundamental change. The church leaders agreed unanimously to tell Schlebusch that in spite of their differences, "having heard Bishop Tutu's reasons for his statement, we share his belief that any retraction of or apology for his statement in this instance would constitute a denial of his prophetic calling... We will not allow any single member of the Body of Christ to be isolated for attack."

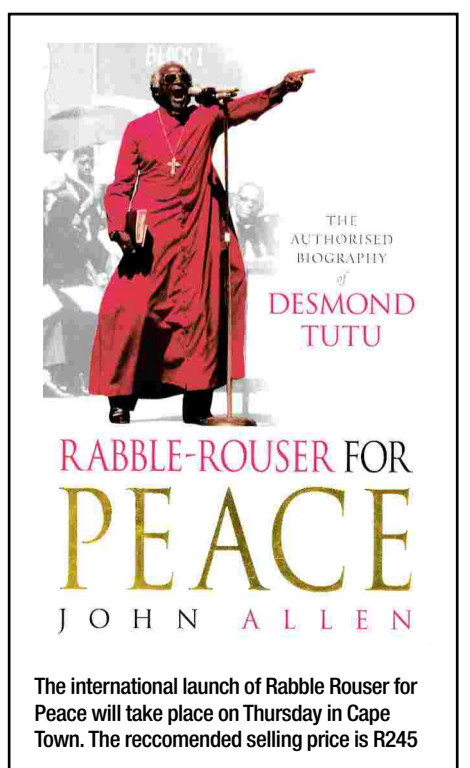
Tutu's family also supported him. Responding to a suggestion by Le Grange that Tutu talked too much, his wife, Leah told him to keep talking: "I would much rather you were happy on Robben Island than unhappy outside," she said. Their son Trevor, now working in England, phoned to give his support; and their youngest daughter, Mpho, at school at Waterford/Kamhlaba in Swaziland, said she was proud of her father's reply to Le Grange.

Desmond wrote to Schlebusch that he had consulted the church leaders and his family: "I have also prayed about it and find I am unable to retract or apologise because I am concerned for peaceful change in this country and believe that we need the international community to persuade

us to sit down and discuss the issues of fundamental change in our country." It was effectively the beginning of his non-violent campaign for force change in South Africa.

John Allen, managing editor of the African news website, *AllAfrica.com*, has reported on and worked with Tutu for 30 years. He met Tutu shortly after the Soweto uprising of 1976, when he was appointed religion correspondent of *The Star*, Johannesburg. After Tutu was appointed archbishop of Cape Town, Allen was appointed his press secretary, and later served as director of media liaison at the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and as Tutu's research assistant at Emory University, Atlanta, in the United States. From 2000 to 2004, Allen was director of communications at Trinity Church, Wall Street, in New York, where he was on the streets below the World Trade Centre during the attacks of September 11, 2001. He returned to South Africa in 2004 to write the biography.

Tomorrow, read in the *Sunday Independent*, *Sunday Tribune* or *weekend Argus* about Tutu's fight with Thabo Mbeki over the ANC's "sycophantic, obsequious conformity" and the enrichment of the new black South African elite.



The international launch of *Rabble Rouser for Peace* will take place on Thursday in Cape Town. The recommended selling price is R245