

WE FOLLOW TWO LEADING ANC MEMBERS BACK TO THEIR HOME TOWNS

# Albie goes back to jail ... just for the day

GAYE DAVIS spends some time with newly returned ANC constitutional expert Albie Sachs in his home town, Cape Town

"I'M not coming to complain, I've just come back to see how things have changed," the African National Congress' Albie Sachs told the bemused desk-sergeant at Cape Town's Caledon Square police station.

It was the first time Sachs had "voluntarily" set foot in a South African police station: the last time he was in Caledon Square was in 1964, where he served out the last of 168 days in detention.

Now he was home again, after 24 years in exile, and visiting emotional landmarks in a tour of the city where he was raised, educated and later persecuted for his political beliefs.

Against one wall of the charge-office hung a board displaying plastic models of "terrorist weapons" — hand-grenades, limpet and anti-personnel mines.

Standard items of decoration in police stations, Sachs had never seen one before: he wondered which of the devices might have been used in the Maputo car-bomb blast two years ago in which he lost his right arm and the partial sight of one eye.

And he pondered the irony at his being classified for years as a "terrorist", yet getting his first glimpse of such weapons of war in a South African police station.

A senior officer invited Sachs into his office.

"You'll know what's happened if I don't come back," Sachs quipped.

"They were more nervous than I was," he said on emerging. "But I must say my heart really beat. As you can imagine I don't feel very excited when I see bars."

As he'd walked along the corridors of the police station, near where he had been held in solitary confinement and tortured by sleep deprivation, he had realised "how important it is to demythologise the police stations of this country."

"We have to have a situation in which everybody can feel free to go to the police because the police are theirs and there to defend them."

"I'm sure in my heart there are a lot of honest police, both black and white, who can help us achieve this in a future South Africa."

Sachs' tour started on Cape Town's Grand Parade, where he had once stood in the back of a lorry to address ANC meetings — "sometimes there were only 50 or 60 of us" — usually in fierce competition with evangelical Christian groups preaching their own form of salvation.

"The only people taking notes of our speeches in those days were security policemen," he said.

His tour took him to the wasteland of what was District Six — a vibrant mixed community before the bulldozers moved in and forced the removal, under the Group Areas Act, of thousands of families during the 1960s.

"I wasn't prepared for this by the photographs," Sachs said as he surveyed the grass-covered mounds of rubble. "This is very shocking. Cape Town's amputated, like I am — there's a hole in it."

Watching construction teams working on another building for the Cape Town Technikon (a white facility which has bought up much of the land in the area) and reading the billboards advertising up-market townhouses for sale, Sachs observed: "It would be a crime of another kind if this open space was simply turned into another area for property developers or even a slick kind of non-racialism."

"The first thing to be done is that the people who lived here have to be asked what they want. Simply to convert it into a place only for the rich would be to again punish those who were moved."

Everything could be healed with the right approach, said Sachs.



'Cape Town's amputated like I am' ... Albie Sachs amid the rubble that was District Six.

Picture: BENNY GOOL, Afrapix

At Cape Town's Community Arts Project he commended students' work, saying: "When I left there was nothing. Art was for special people."

He expected a "tremendous renaissance" of South African artistic expression. "People must feel free to express this new phase we're entering into — to raise their doubts and explore the contradictions. Then we can have literature, poetry and visual art second to none in the world."

A group of workers engaged in a skills' training project at the centre gathered round Sachs.

"We're entering a new phase and we have to prepare ourselves for freedom. Are you ready for freedom?" he asked them. "Yes!" they shouted.

"Are you sure?" he asked. "We've had to survive the bombs, the teargas ... we can't walk into freedom with our heads down, we have to walk tall. I think Madiba's (ANC deputy president Nelson Mandela) smile is worth 500 AK47s."

"Just give me one AK," said one of the group.

"But we've had so much killing," Sachs chided. "We're going to be in government quite soon — not alone, but with everyone else. We must get used to the idea that we are entering the age of freedom, when the country belongs to all of us, where everyone can work and live freely."

"We are the lucky generation, we are bringing it about. I'm not saying there are no obstacles — there are terrible obstacles, and a lot of people are going to try and stop us."

In the squatter settlement of KTC, he heard from community leaders how an estimated 20 000 people had only nine water points — seven of them presently out of commission.

Surrounded by giggling children at the Sithandiwe pre-school, he learned how the community had been unable to pay the salaries of all four teachers. One remained to teach 100 children, offering her services voluntarily.

"This is the first time we see the ANC sitting with the National Party and that gives us good hope, we just get a hope that the ANC will be in power. I think things will get better then," said community leader Kenneth Tsamana.

Sachs responded: "But remember, you are ANC. ANC isn't something that's going to come from the skies and liberate everybody. That's why the vote is so important. With the vote you can get your rights."