

ANTI-  
APARTHEID  
LEGACY:  
CENTRE OF  
MEMORY AND  
LEARNING

AT 28 PENTON STREET, ISLINGTON



# 14TH MARCH 1982 - THE BOMBING OF 28 PENTON STREET

THE FORMER UK HEADQUARTERS OF THE AFRICAN  
NATIONAL CONGRESS (ANC) OF SOUTH AFRICA

## THE BOMBING

At 9am on 14th March 1982, a 10lb bomb exploded at the rear wall of 28 Penton Street, the UK headquarters of the then exiled African National Congress.

It is likely that ANC President Oliver Tambo was expected to be in the building for he was due to address large crowds of anti-apartheid demonstrators in Trafalgar Square later that day.

ANC researcher and volunteer, Mr. Vernet Mbatha, was the only person on site at the time. He sustained minor injuries and managed to escape by climbing onto the roof and across neighbouring buildings.

The staircase had been demolished in the blast. The ANC's publication facilities, along with important records and office equipment were also destroyed.

## LOCAL IMPACT

The impact of the apartheid regime's divisive and often violent policies were directly experienced by the local community and supporters of the anti-apartheid solidarity movements.

The bombing happened not too far from a local market, posing serious danger to stallholders and shoppers. Windows of neighbouring buildings were shattered, including the Samuel Smith pub and the White Lion Free School, both on White Lion Street situated metres away from the explosion. Debris from the blast was found nearly 400m away and the explosion was heard as far away as Stoke Newington.

The Islington Gazette, in an article published on 19th March 1982, commented that the attack "revived wartime memories of the Blitz."



There was a shattering experience for the occupants of the Samuel Smith public-house 100 yards from where an explosion damaged African National Congress offices in White Lion Street, Pentonville, early

# THE GUARDIAN

London and Manchester Monday March 15 1982 20p



## Bomb wrecks London office of ANC

By Nick Davies  
The London offices of the African National Congress were wrecked by a 100-lb bomb which exploded against the rear wall at nine o'clock yesterday morning. Wind gusts up to 400 yards away shattered.  
Mr Verne Mbatia, an anti-apartheid activist, was slightly injured. The explosion provoked reports of 'South African tricks' and reports of a 'volving fight-wire' being disrupted. Former Rho servicemen in London.  
Police kept the area closed off for much of the day. Reports that there was a second office in Pretoria, South Africa, were also reported. A police helicopter was overhead while the area was being cleared.

Mr Verne Mbatia (above left) leads Mr Verne Mbatia away from the damaged building (pictured behind Mr Mbatia) speaking later at the anti-apartheid rally in Trafalgar Square. Above right: Mr Alfred Nzo, ANC secretary-general, and Mr Verne Mbatia, ANC secretary-general, are seen with other ANC leaders.

# THE POLITICAL AFTERMATH

The Anti-Apartheid Movement (AAM) and other liberation solidarity movements pointed the finger at Pretoria for the bomb. Many believed strongly that the Bureau of State Security (BOSS), Pretoria's intelligence and covert operations service agency, was behind the brazen attack.

Calls were made for special government security arrangements to be put into place for the leadership of the liberation movements in the UK but Scotland Yard reportedly saw no reason for this measure.

# ADMISSION OF GUILT

Nine former agents of the apartheid security apparatus admitted to the planning and execution of the bombing at the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC).

They told the TRC that they had been led by BOSS operative Craig Williamson, and had arrived in the UK on false documentation with the help of individuals in the South African Embassy in Trafalgar Square.

The bomb was assembled on the embassy's 5th floor with parts brought into the country specifically for the mission.

# ANC STATEMENT ON THE ATTACK

The ANC's Secretary General, Alfred Nzo, released a statement saying that the bombing "constitutes a challenge to the people of South Africa and to the international community to put an end to this criminal system of apartheid."

"The bombing of our London office," the statement continued, "marks an escalation of the programme of terrorism by the regime in the vain attempt to save itself from an inevitable defeat by the people of South Africa and the ANC."

THE OBSERVER  
WORLDNEWS  
**How we bombed London**

Philip Van Niekerk talks in Johannesburg to former South African spy-master Craig Williamson about the apartheid regime's secret mission to send an explosive 'message' to the British Government and the ANC.

A special team of South African soldiers, led by a former South African spy-master, was sent to London to plant a bomb which would cause a major explosion in the heart of the city. The mission was to send an explosive 'message' to the British Government and the ANC. The team was led by a former South African spy-master, Craig Williamson, who was known for his role in the apartheid regime's security apparatus. The mission was carried out by a special team of soldiers, who were trained in sabotage and guerrilla warfare. The bomb was planted in the rear wall of the ANC's London office, which was located in Trafalgar Square. The explosion occurred on Sunday, March 14, 1982, at nine o'clock in the morning. The bomb was a 100-lb time bomb, which was set to explode at a specific time. The explosion caused significant damage to the building and resulted in the death of one person and the injury of several others. The apartheid regime in South Africa claimed that the bombing was a result of a 'volving fight-wire' between the ANC and the South African government. However, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) later admitted that the bombing was the result of a secret mission planned and executed by the apartheid security apparatus.

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PRESS RELEASE

STATEMENT OF THE AFRICAN NATIONAL CONGRESS ON THE BOMBING OF ITS LONDON OFFICE ON SUNDAY, MARCH 14, 1982.

THE BOMBING OF OUR LONDON OFFICE YESTERDAY MARKS AN ESCALATION OF THE PROGRAMME OF TERRORISM BY THE PRETORIA REGIME IN THE VAIN ATTEMPT TO SAVE ITSELF FROM THE INEVITABLE DEFEAT BY THE PEOPLE OF SOUTH AFRICA LED BY THE AFRICAN NATIONAL CONGRESS.

IN THIS RESPECT, WE WOULD LIKE TO STATE MOST CATEGORICALLY THAT THE STORY PLANTED BY THE SOUTH AFRICAN POLICE IN THE JOHANNESBURG SUNDAY TIMES, NOTABLY ON THE VERY EVE OF THE ATTACK, THAT THREE WHITE MEN FROM BRITAIN CARRIED OUT THE RAID ON VOORTREKKERHOOGTE MILITARY BASE, IS A COMPLETE AND UTTER FABRICATION. IT IS INTENDED TO JUSTIFY THE BOMBING OF OUR OFFICE AND TO REPEAT THE LIE THAT THE STRUGGLE IS WAGED FROM OUTSIDE WHILE THE PEOPLE INSIDE SOUTH AFRICA REMAIN DOCILE.

THE PRETORIA POLICY OF INTERNATIONAL TERRORISM WHICH HAS RESULTED IN THE INVASION OF ANGOLA, SEYCHELLES, AND OTHER COUNTRIES OF SOUTHERN AFRICA, AS WELL AS THE ASSASSINATION OF OUR REPRESENTATIVE IN ZIMBABWE, JOE GQABI, THE MURDER OF OUR PEOPLE IN MATOLA, MOZAMBIQUE, LAST YEAR, THE ATTACKS ON OUR MEMBERS IN OTHER PARTS OF SOUTHERN AFRICA, INCLUDING BOTSWANA, LESOTHO AND SWAZILAND, AND THE KILLING AND HARASSMENT OF OUR LEADERS AND ACTIVISTS INSIDE SOUTH AFRICA, HAS NOT DIMINISHED OUR DETERMINATION TO FREE OURSELVES. THIS LATEST ACT OF TERROR SIMILARLY WILL SUCCEED ONLY TO STRENGTHEN OUR RESOLVE TO HIT BACK WITH ALL MEANS AT OUR DISPOSAL.

THIS ATTACK WAS NOT ONLY AGAINST THE ANC BUT ALSO AGAINST THE WORLD ANTI APARTHEID FORCES WHICH HAD GATHERED IN LONDON IN SUPPORT OF OUR STRUGGLE. IT THEREFORE CONSTITUTES A CHALLENGE TO THE PEOPLE OF SOUTH AFRICA AND TO THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY TO PUT AN END TO THIS CRIMINAL SYSTEM OF APARTHEID.

## IN THE PRESS

During the 1980s, covert attacks against exiled members of the liberation movement were carried out across the globe, for example in Lesotho, Mozambique, Botswana, France, Sweden and as far as the Seychelles.

The incident at Penton Street was reported from various perspectives, in the UK and abroad. Some UK example headlines:

“South Africa stands accused over bomb” Morning Star - March, 1982.

“Bomb wrecks rebel’s office” Daily Express - March, 1982

“Rivals may have set ANC office bomb” The Sunday Times - March 1982

“Exiles put blame for blast on BOSS” Daily Mail - March 1982.

## THE REBUILD AND BEYOND

The British Council of Churches offered the ANC temporary office space in its central London office while 28 Penton street was rebuilt.

Archbishop Trevor Huddleston, AAM President and an anti-apartheid veteran who'd lived in South Africa and witnessed the the effects of apartheid, launched the 'ANC Office Appeal Fund' to aid reconstruction of the building. It was supported by Labour Party Leader, Michael Foot MP, Liberal Party Leader David Steel MP, and British trade union leader, Jack Jones CH (later MBE).

After the rebuild, the ANC returned to Penton Street and continued to coordinate many important campaigns including 'Votes for Freedom' in the lead up to the 1994 elections. In 1994, following over 45 years of apartheid in South Africa, the first democratic elections were held. The ANC's Nelson Mandela was sworn in as President. The ANC no longer needed their Islington base.

Action for Southern Africa (the AAM's evolution) used the premises from 1994 until 2008. A green heritage plaque was installed on the building in 2010 to commemorate the ANC's 16 years in Penton Street and the contributions of local residents to the struggle against apartheid.

