









### 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 antiapartheid 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

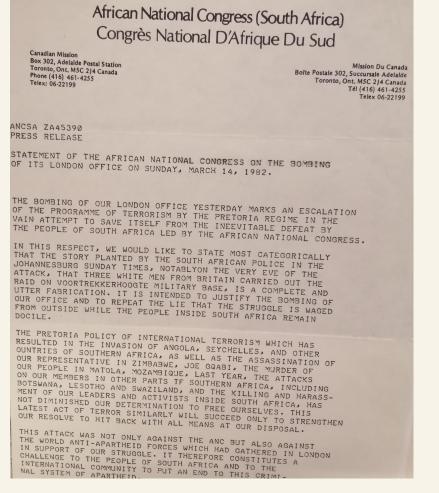
The impact of the apartheid regime's divisive and often violent policies were directly experienced by the local community and supporters of the anti-apartheid solidarity movements.

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."







# 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.

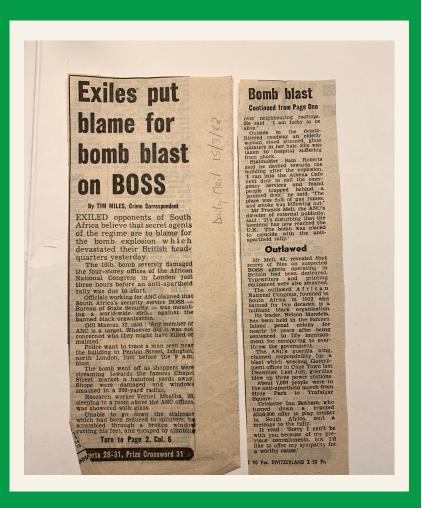
## ANC STATEMENT ON THE ATTACK

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."







All images courtesy of Anti-Apartheid Movement Archives

#### 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 antiapartheid 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.