On 21 March South African police in the black township of Sharpeville killed more than sixty peaceful protesters who had been demonstrating against pass laws, which required blacks to carry identification. The incident sparked a massive outbreak of strikes, demonstrations, and riots in South Africa and focused international criticism on the apartheid regime. In a telegram sent the following day, Claude Barnett, head of the Associated Negro Press (ANP), requested that King wire him a "brief reaction to slaughter by police troops and planes of [Negroes] in South Africa conducting peaceful mass demonstration against restrictive law." Barnett queried, "Is there a lesson for USA where protests are also in progress?" He released excerpts of the following draft over the ANP wire on 28 March.¹

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Of man's inhumanity to man. Such barbaric and uncivilized acts are shocking to all men of goodwill. This tragic massacre by police troops in South Africa should arouse the conscience of the whole world. This tragic occurrence in South Africa should also serve as a warning signal to the United States where peaceful demonstrations are also being conducted by student groups. As long as segregation continues to exist; as long as Gestapo-like tactics are used by officials of southern communities; and as long as [there are] Governors and United States Senators arrogantly defy the law of the land, the United States is faced with a potential reign of terror more barbaric than anything we see in South Africa.

Martin Luther King, Jr., President
The Southern Christian Leadership Conference

To Dwight D. Eisenhower

26 March 1960
New York, N.Y.

King and other civil rights supporters applaud the State Department’s protest of the Sharpeville massacres and urge Eisenhower to issue a declaration “placing the administration firmly on the side of Negroes” in the South, adding: “Africans are turning to the UN for moral support and encouragement; must we?” In response, Gerald Morgan, deputy assistant to the president, referred to Eisenhower’s earlier expression of sympathy for the “efforts of any group to enjoy the rights of equality.”

The President
The White House

We are grateful that our State Department has protested the mass killings of our South African brothers and we are pleased that the UN Security Council will meet March 29th to consider that outrage.

2. Noting that the United States “does not ordinarily comment on the internal affairs of governments with which it enjoys normal relations,” a State Department representative expressed “regret” for “the tragic loss of life resulting from the measures taken against the demonstrators in South Africa” (Dana Adams Schmidt, “Police Violence in South Africa Criticized by U.S.,” New York Times, 23 March 1960). On 1 April, following four days of discussion, the United Nations Security Council blamed the violence on South Africa’s “continued disregard” of United Nations resolutions “calling upon it to