

TO: PARENTS OF ALL MISSISSIPPI SUMMER VOLUNTEERS

FROM: COFO, 1017 LYNCH STREET, JACKSON, MISSISSIPPI

Immediate action is needed by all those concerned with the safety of the Mississippi Summer Volunteers. Unless the President and the Attorney General can be convinced of the need for Federal protection of civil rights workers in Mississippi, the events of Philadelphia are almost certain to be repeated over and over again in the next two months.

We are asking all parents to use their influence in the coming week to pressure President Johnson and Attorney General Kennedy into a commitment to protect workers before violence occurs, instead of waiting until the worst has happened before they offer their help. To help you understand what can be done, it is necessary to stress the following points:

The mood of Mississippi today is one of mounting tension. Acts of violence or near violence are increasing. We have enclosed a two-page report on incidents from one twenty-four hour period. The 16 incidents in the report show that violence is not limited to any section of the state and that intimidation takes an unlimited variety of forms.

The Federal Government did not act quickly enough in the Philadelphia case. We are enclosing a chronology of the attempts of COFO to obtain an FBI investigation or other Federal aid in the Philadelphia incident. This report shows that it took 24 hours - undoubtedly the critical 24 hours - to get the Federal Government to act. FBI agents in Mississippi are always white, generally Southern, and usually from Mississippi itself. Like local law enforcement officers, these agents often serve to obstruct, rather than aid, the administration of justice in civil rights cases. The enclosed chronology deals only with Federal contacts; local police changed their story continually and were useless in the attempt to locate the missing persons.

The Federal Government does have the ability to act quickly and effectively in support of civil rights. The third enclosure lists some provisions for Federal action in civil rights cases. It shows that the FBI does in fact have the necessary authority to provide protection for civil rights workers. Moreover, the President could act on executive authority to provide further protection, for instance through the appointment of Federal Marshalls.

On the reverse side of this sheet, an incident in Itta Bena is described. In this case, the FBI did help protect Summer Volunteers, and actually arrested three white men who had threatened Summer Project workers. The Itta Bena incident shows that the proper Federal agencies can act effectively when they choose to do so. The difference in the role played by the Federal Government in the Philadelphia and Itta Bena incidents was due not to differences in Federal authority, but resulted from the pressure of private citizens on the Government in the last few days.

It is difficult to stress sufficiently the urgency of our request. Without immediate action, the lives of civil rights workers will be further and senselessly endangered; and we will have failed in one of our primary goals: to offer some semblance of protection to the Negroes of Mississippi, who have suffered for decades from the kind of incident which occurred in Philadelphia.

For instance, there have been five 'unsolved' murders of Negroes in the southwest part of the state since the beginning of the year. These murders received no national publicity until the beginning of the Mississippi Summer Project. Only our presence in Mississippi ensures the continued concern of the nation for the Negroes of that state, and the chance that the Federal Government will move effectively to provide protection for their lives and civil rights.

For this reason, in spite of the danger involved, we are fully committed to continuing the Mississippi Summer Project. This does not mean that we will attempt to provoke the state. Our program remains what it has been from its first inception: an attempt to bring educational and political opportunity to Mississippi's Negroes, where they have never had these things before.

Our workers will participate in voter registration projects and will teach in Freedom Schools and Community Centers. We are specifically avoiding any demonstrations for integrated facilities, as we do not feel the state is ready to permit such activity at this time. All workers, staff and Summer Volunteers alike, are pledged to non-violence in all situations.

As a further precaution, we are limiting work to a small area around each project center. All Summer Volunteers have gone through an intensive training session on conditions in Mississippi and the responses and actions they should take to allow them to work most safely in the state. A large legal staff is being maintained in the state to help those who get in trouble.

We are asking that movement at night be kept to a minimum. We are continuing a check-in system which allowed us to know almost immediately that the Philadelphia party was missing. However, though all precautions will be taken, we are determined to continue our work; and we need your help. We request that you do the following things:

1. Contact local papers and radio and TV stations and make certain that the full story about Mississippi is being carried in your community. Use the enclosed documents and the and the experiences of your own children in Mississippi to indicate the goals of the Summer Project and the continued resistance it is certain to meet. Stress in particular the need for Federal protection.

2. Contact the President, and Attorney General, and your own state and national representatives and demand immediate Federal protection for all people in Mississippi. Organize friends and relatives to make the same demand.

We are asking the following three things from the Federal Government:

1. That Federal Marshalls be stationed throughout the state. These Marshalls should be present in all cases where violence is likely. They should be clearly empowered to make all necessary arrests, including the arrest of law enforcement officers. They should be on call at any hour of the day when civil rights workers feel they are endangered.
2. That the FBI and Justice Department officials be instructed to provide full and immediate help in all incidents where danger is involved. FBI agents should use their power of arrest. Even more important, they should investigate immediately when so requested.
3. That President Johnson confer immediately with COFO leaders. This meeting has been requested several times in the last two months. The President declined to meet with COFO representatives, though they predicted that violence would occur early in the summer if Federal aid were not forthcoming.

The choice before Americans this summer seems very clear. They can either accept at face value the statements of the Attorney General that the Federal Government does not have sufficient power to protect the citizens of the country within its own borders - in which case the consequences will fall on those of us who live and work in Mississippi. Or they can use the influence and power they have over their own government to ensure that the events of Philadelphia are not repeated within the coming hours and days in Mississippi.

Robert Moses

Director
Mississippi Summer Project