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NEWS

Southern Christian Leadership Conference

Martin Luther King Jr., *President*

FOR RELEASE: IMMEDIATE

SCLC WARNS OF DISASTER IN MISSISSIPPI

ATLANTA, GA., Jan. 27 (SCLC) -- Dr. Ralph David Abernathy of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference today warned of "disastrous consequences in Grenada, Mississippi, if our civil rights workers and the Negro community there are not given adequate protection by federal, state and local authorities."

The warning came in the wake of a fire Sunday night at the Bell Flower Baptist Church, which provided an office for the SCLC staff in Grenada. The blaze destroyed or badly damaged much of the church's roof, interior, furnishings, records, and heating facilities.

"We can not help wondering if enemies of the Grenada County Freedom Movement set fire to the church," Dr. Abernathy said. "It is only natural that we suspect this. Some residents of the church neighborhood in Grenada reported hearing sounds like explosions when the fire started. Also, our staff members and local Negro parents and children have been subjected to harrassment, threats and terrible physical abuse ever since last summer when the Southern Christian Leadership Conference began an all-out drive for equality and justice in Grenada."

(MORE)

Dr. Abernathy, Vice President At-Large, and Rev. Andrew Young, Executive Director, currently are directing all SCLC programs while their close associate, SCLC President Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., is on leave writing a book.

"Our nation should be aware of three very important facts about the situation in Grenada," Dr. Abernathy said.

"First, despite our repeated appeals to federal, state and local law-enforcement agencies for protection in Grenada, our opponents remain free to threaten and intimidate us.

"Second, this will not stop our programs in Grenada.

"Third, if lawlessness prevails in that city, there could be disastrous consequences.

"I want to make this perfectly clear: It is white people who are responsible for violence and disorder in Grenada. Lives and property in the Negro community are in danger.

"Our program is nonviolent. We can not and will not answer violence with violence. Surely the impoverished and frightened Negro community deserves full protection by legal authorities.

"Finally, I would say to those who piously condemn 'crime and violence in the streets of America' that they should take a look at Grenada, where white people have allowed beatings and cruel harrassment of a people who simply ask to be free."

(MORE)

The record of brutality in Grenada has been tragic. Last summer, police assaulted a peaceful demonstration by Negroes. Sheriff's deputies attacked a civil rights fund-raising dance with tear gas. Hundreds of Negroes were jailed. When public schools were integrated in September, white men used ax handles, lead pipes and chains to beat Negro children attending the schools. This violence subsided briefly when it was exposed to the world.

But when reporters and TV cameras left Grenada, the lawlessness resumed. Inside and outside the integrated schools, Negro pupils endured harrassment, taunts, profanities and threats from white students, teachers, school officials, local police and State troopers. In October when Negroes protested beatings and abuse of the children, more than 250 demonstrators were arrested and jailed. In jail, seven SCLC staff members were beaten severely, and local Negroes were mistreated. At the schools, the pattern of cruelty against Negroes continued.

SCLC programs in Grenada include school integration, voter registration, tutorial classes on basic education and citizenship, family and health care, organization of welfare recipients, development of community leadership, and selective buying campaigns against firms which discriminate against Negroes. The Negro community also raised funds for their own co-operative supermarket, which is now being built.

After the Bell Flower Baptist Church fire, SCLC set up a new office in Grenada, and the programs continue.

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