The March

A freedom-song refrain

October 1, 2000 By Kai Wright

Over and over, the song rang out in Zulu, a cadence that had summoned the strength of black South Africa in its struggle to end white minority rule: “Hold it / you fighters / The sound of your machines / reminds me / of Oliver Tambo!”

Engulfed by 2,500 people belting out the chorus of the famous African National Congress (ANC) tribute to a movement hero, I watched awestruck as protesters danced the toi toi, another expression of the anti-apartheid struggle. I’d seen countless newsreels of this sort of defiant celebration. Now, with apartheid history, I listened as a new generation of fighters told the world that the war for their lives has begun again.

“The toi toi gives me strength. I bring down this foot,” said HIVer-activist Mercy Makhalemele, stamping down one foot while raising the other high, “and I feel it. I bring down the other foot” -- her boot crashed to the cement -- “and I feel it.”

That’s just the reaction that organizers of this July 9 march through downtown Durban sought to spark among the 4.2 million South Africans who are HIV positive: a renewed spirit of resistance against what they consider the nation’s new oppressors -- multinational pharmaceutical companies.

South Africa’s Treatment Action Campaign (TAC) organized the protest in partnership with the U.S.-based Health GAP Coalition, with scores of conferees from abroad joining in. The march, which nearly upstaged the opening of the conference, revealed a growing impatience among black South Africans from poor townships, both with drug-company price gouging and with their own government’s equivocation about providing basic medications for HIV-related illnesses.

“The drug companies are strong. But we have right on our side,” said Zackie Achmat, a TAC leader. “We did not stop apartheid by not fighting. We can’t stop HIV without a fight.”

The march witnessed the reassembly of the old anti-apartheid coalition -- including a major trade-union confederation, the South African Communist Party and rank-and-filers from the ANC. But the most dramatic link between past and present came when Winnie Madikizela-Mandela, a national hero for her decades-long resistance to apartheid, addressed the rally. Youthful protesters screamed like adoring fans seeing a rap star, but her song went this way: “Today we are marching

again. It is part of the long walk to freedom. We brought down apartheid -- who are the pharmaceuticals?”

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