

Canadian officials deny visit to former apartheid prisoner

Bureaucratic hurdles force cancellation of Ontario speaking tour

Even PMO, letter from Nelson Mandela failed to help 70-year-old

JAKLAND POSS
FEATURE WRITER

Lionel Davis won't be coming to Canada, or at least not anytime soon.

A hero in his own land, the former South African freedom fighter couldn't even get his foot through Canada's front door this fall as this country's immigration officials in Pretoria repeatedly blocked him from carrying out a planned Ontario speaking tour sponsored by a group of Toronto businesspeople and the Windsor-area Catholic school board.

"Who knows why we do these stupid and irrational things?" said Gerald Caplan, a Canadian expert on Africa. "They hurt us terribly. It is staggering that anyone who was involved in the struggle against apartheid should be regarded as anything but a freedom fighter. They should be welcomed here as heroes."

In a strange twist, the office of Prime Minister Paul Martin attempted to intervene on the South African's behalf but was unsuccessful.

"We had the PM's office trying to help, but they couldn't help us, which was extraordinary," says Toronto businesswoman Jayne Dunsmore, who helped organize the now aborted visit.

"The PM's office kept saying they couldn't find the file number."

Davis, 70, is a husband and father of three, a university graduate, a famed storyteller, an accomplished painter and a man who's been an inspiration to countless people all over the world. He works nowadays as a "heritage educa-



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Gerald Caplan, Canadian expert on Africa speaking about treatment of Lionel Davis, pictured left

tor" at Cape Town's infamous Robben Island prison, where he long ago spent seven years behind bars as a political detainee. The facility has since been converted into a museum devoted to the years of white-minority rule in South Africa and attracts people from all over the world.

But Canadian officials treated the former freedom fighter as just another convicted crook and would not let him in.

"He's this tiny little man," said Dunsmore, who met Davis while visiting South Africa a year ago and was impressed by his presence and his life's story. "He's a wonderful artist and a great man. I just love him."

Davis was scheduled to come to Canada on Oct. 10 to begin a three-week visit to help raise money for the struggle against AIDS in Africa and to increase awareness about human-rights concerns. He was to address a corporate luncheon in Toronto and spend two weeks in Windsor, where he was to tell his story of suffering and forgiveness to an estimated 10,000 school children.

However, because of his three-decade-old prison record, Canadian immigration authorities ruled Davis required clearance from South African police before travelling to Canada.

There wasn't time to obtain it, and the trip was cancelled.

Meanwhile, Davis spent part of October on a speaking tour in Norway, where he was welcomed with open arms. He also holds a U.S. visa, good for 10 years, and has visited that country "four or five times" in recent years without hindrance.

"Nobody asks me for police clearance, and I thought the Americans would be the stickiest," Davis said yesterday by phone from Cape Town, where he lives.

Like former South African president Nelson Mandela, Davis was jailed for his role in the struggle against apartheid, as South Africa's now dismantled system of white minority rule is known. In 1964, he was convicted of conspiracy to commit sabotage and served a seven-year sentence in Robben Island prison, the same facility where Mandela was incarcerated for 18 years. In all, Mandela spent 27 years behind bars.

A letter from Mandela attesting to Davis's bona fides was included with his application but appeared to carry little weight with Canadian officials.

Three times in late September and early October, Davis applied to the Canadian High Commission in Pretoria for a visa, and three times officials turned him down because of his record.

Dunsmore and a colleague — Catherine Davey, daughter of long-time federal Liberal party strategist Keith Davey — contacted the Prime Minister's office after Davis's application was rejected the first time. That didn't help.

"The whole thing sounds ridiculous," Dunsmore said. "They said they couldn't find a file number for Lionel's application. But he *did* apply. There was a file number."

Jan Schavemaker, manager of a small Cape Town document-expediting firm called Visa Express, told the *Toronto Star* this week that he handled Davis's file personally. He says he forwarded the application to the Canadian High Commission in Pretoria on three occasions and says that it came back each time with a notation that said, "Police clearance required."

Greg Scott, a spokesman for Citizenship and Immigration Canada, would not comment on Davis's case, because of privacy concerns, but said immigration officials are authorized to use their discretion in such cases.

"Every application is assessed on the basis of the individual applicant," he said. "Everything is looked at. These are well-trained professionals."

A member of a small anti-apartheid group called the National Liberation Front, Davis was 28 years old when he was sent to Robben Island in 1964.

He said yesterday he is now hoping to visit Canada next year, and Dunsmore confirmed that she and others are trying to reschedule a visit, possibly for next April.

Davis's aborted trip last month is not the first time that Canadian authorities have blocked former South African political prisoners from entering the country because of their records.

In October 1996, Ahmed Kathrada and Barbara Hogan were denied regular visas and told to apply for special ministerial permits because both had spent time in jail for their political activities. They refused.