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The Star

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Tussle over big business at TRC

Black Management Forum dismisses anti-apartheid claims while Rembrandt boss describes policy as immoral, foolish and wasteful

By ROBERT BRAND

With few exceptions, white business institutions which have testified before the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's business hearing have argued that apartheid was inimical to economic growth and that they had actively opposed it.

But whether business profited from apartheid, and what should be done to redress injustices of the past, remained the main focus on the second

day of the hearing yesterday.

The Black Management Forum said claims that business did not profit from apartheid but contributed to its downfall should be rejected "with contempt".

BMF president Lot Ndlovu said the former government co-opted white business, resulting in an "overt and covert" alliance between business and the government. Business leaders who voiced opposition to apartheid "were quickly brought in line with their colleagues", and most businesses "op-

pressed and exploited blacks", the BMF said.

The BMF submission detailed specific instances of racial discrimination in the business environment as well as the exclusion of black business from the marketplace.

Earlier, Rembrandt chief executive Johann Rupert branded apartheid as "immoral, foolish, wasteful of meagre resources and based on a denial of facts".

Submitting a report on his company's activities during the apartheid era, Rupert said: "We

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- 1 Black Management Forum
- 2 Rupert J.
- 3 Rembrandt
- 4 A.H.J.
- 5 J. Ndlovu
- 6 Kommissie
- 7 S. Mkhize
- 8 S. Mkhize
- 9 Mkhize
- 10 Controlling

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The Star

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did not participate in the system because we knew it was immoral and that it squandered the country's resources, leaving our children in debt."

White businessmen were faced with limited options in their operations. "Either you agreed with the system or (you) emigrated. If you did not agree but still wanted to stay, then it was imperative for you to oppose it from within."

Rupert said his company chose the last option.

"For 40 years we chose to op-

erate in an unjust system. It is true that we did not do enough but we have treated our employees loyally and fairly."

The Afrikaanse Handelsinstituut expanded on its proposal that part of the R9-billion SA Special Risk Insurance Agency (Sasria) fund be used to pay for reparations for victims of apartheid. Former AHI president Theo van Wyk said there was no doubt white business benefited from apartheid, but he denied that Afrikaner businesses benefited inordinately

from state patronage.

He rejected a proposal by economics professor Sampie Terreblanche that a wealth tax should be levied on individuals to pay for the upliftment of disadvantaged communities, but said an effort should be made to redress wrongs of the past.

This could be done by using some of the assets of the Sasria fund to finance the TRC's proposed reparations policy, in terms of which individual victims of apartheid would be paid reparation grants of up to

R24 000 a year for six years.

The Islamic Chamber of Commerce and Industry said business under apartheid had benefited from cheap labour, an absence of competition from black business, discrimination in job opportunities, and political power in white hands.

"The corporate sector must play a proactive role in redressing past imbalances," ICCI president Ebrahim Kharsany said.

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