American Observers Arrested in Rhodesia

New York, N.Y. February 19, 1980. Three American observers at the forthcoming elections and a journalist accompanying them were detained and interrogated by Rhodesian security forces in a tribal area outside Salisbury, Sunday February 17.

The observers, who arrived in Rhodesia just last week, include George Houser, executive director of the American Committee on Africa (ACOA), Tilden Le'elCle, professor at Hunter College in New York and ACOA treasurer, and Cynthia Cannady, an attorney from Washington, D.C. representing TransAfrica, a black American lobbying organization. The journalist with them is Michael Shuster, an editor of Southern Africa and reporter for Pacifica Radio. A fourth member of the independent American monitoring team, Edgar Lockwood, director of the Washington Office on Africa, was not with the group when the incident occurred.

According to a story filed by Shuster February 18th, the group, accompanied by some members of ZANU had gone to the Chiota Tribal Trust Land, a reservation about one hour south of Salisbury where there have been numerous reports of intimidation of the local people by the auxiliaries and security forces. Having interviewed several people who described their experiences they were approached by a man who appeared to have been badly beaten. He had been travelling in his car along the road, he told them, when the security forces attacked him.

"They came and hit me without fault, without fault," he told Shuster, adding that they had accused him of being a magandaqa (bandit) without even bothering to ask him for any personal identification. "Those soldiers, they hit so many people" he told Shuster.

At that point an armored truck carrying the same unit of soldiers roared up. About a dozen African soldiers carrying machine guns and automatic rifles leaped off the truck yelling and swearing. They surrounded the cars, guns at the ready, shouting "we've got the terrorists" and according to Le'elCle, "they looked ready to kill."
Eventually the Americans were separated from each other, and the two cars in which they had been travelling and the truck proceeded in convoy to a nearby base camp. There they were questioned by soldiers and police—the police explaining that they were looking for guerrillas. All were eventually released, and none of the Americans were physically assaulted, but Shuster describes the experience as "sobering."

The Rhodesian military has mounted charges that the forces of guerrilla leader Robert Mugabe are intimidating the population. But as George Houser of the American Committee on Africa points out, that's not the only intimidation going on.

"If you are anybody faced with men who are carrying guns that they are ready to use, who seem to have triggerhappy fingers, you are going to be intimidated," said Houser. "This is the daily experience. Now they do not have any political meetings and therefore when we are told by some of our friends here that they are intimidated, we can believe it, because we saw it, and we felt it."