

RELIGIOUS ACTION NETWORK

for justice and peace in southern Africa

a project of the American Committee on Africa

To: RAN Members and Friends
From: Aleah Bacquie
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It has been extremely challenging working here. I trust that you've seen some of the stories I sent to the office, so you know I've been working in the East Rand which is unfortunately the violence capital of the country right now. It was one of the ANC's strongest areas. We're now trying to collect evidence against the security forces. We are also calling a Black political summit in the East Rand where we will try to work out a strategy for normalizing the situation. Since we've collected some data against Inkatha, they have indicated a strong willingness to cooperate rather than have us take the info to the Press.

I have seen burnt bodies and wounded victims, burnt out and abandoned communities, and desperate internal refugees. I've met with hostile "warlords" and militant "comrades" who have threatened my life for helping to bury unidentifiable bodies in "their" cemeteries whom they believed were Inkatha members. I've helped pressure the police to inform the next of kin of those people identified after a colleague forced the government to use fingerprints to I.D. the previous "unidentifiable". I've fought with the Press to cover stories and had my run-ins with the SADF (South African Defense Force).

I have also been working on the SACC's voter education project. There is so much to be done to reach everyone and explain things about the negotiations so people understand what their votes actually mean. I am supposed to speak at a women's function at a church next month where some women have said that voting is for their husbands and sons, not for them. Religious leaders seem to be winning the battle for all prisoners to have the right to vote. They consider voting a basic human right which should not be abridged, even if someone is convicted of a crime. And you know, of course, that many people here are in jail for no other reason than that they are Black. (Not that we're totally unfamiliar with that reality in the U.S.) I believe that my work has truly been of value on the ground, as well as in the stories I've written.

It's time to go back to work so I'll sign off now. I'll just say that from what I've seen it is critical that we maintain and even step up support for the coming elections. Every right wing and Uncle Tom threat is mobilizing to destabilize the country before the elections. And as Mr. Mandela said of the Freedom Alliance - comprised of Inkatha, white racists and "homeland" sellouts - "They are all products of apartheid. Not one of them has ever been involved in the liberation of a Black man."

Things are ever changing and ever remaining the same here in South Africa. De Klerk's ok of the raid and murder of those five boys in Umtata and receipt of the Nobel Peace Prize in the same week is proof of that.

My prayers are with you all as I hope yours are with me.

By Aleah Bacquie

SADF strike in a changing South Africa

The same government presently negotiating with the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC) for a democratic transformation of the South African society, engineered a raid on the home of a PAC member in Transkei, killing boys in the process. That same government had previously refused to sign an agreement of "mutual cessation of hostilities" with the PAC because, it argued, it was not fighting against the party. The self-same government deployed troops with silencers on their semi-automatic weapons, who opened fire on youths apparently lying on mattresses at the time.

The outcry has been thunderous: from the church, human rights groups, political parties, and even from white residents of Transkei. However, the South African Defence Force (SADF) termed the raid, which was authorised by the white minority president, a "successful" military operation targeted at "terrorists". Defense Minister Kobie Coetsee characterised the raid a "correct political decision in the best interests of the country and its citizens."

According to the SADF the twins killed in the raid were 19 years old. It asserts that three of the five youths shot were trained APLA operatives and that the "men were armed and offered resistance." The SADF also claims that the home of the former Robben Island prisoner was in fact a "verified APLA facility".

Child Victims

They said that the occupants of the house "appeared to be grownups."

The PAC, Sicelo Mpendulo, father of three of the young victims and uncle to another, and the Lawyers for Human Rights (LHR) all dispute the questionable claims of the SADF.

The father maintains that his twins, Samora and Sadet, were sixteen years old standard 4 students at Papangindlela Junior Secondary School. Neighbors in the area interviewed in an independent

investigation of the Lawyers for Human Rights all support that statement. The LHR report claims that amongst the other boys killed were Sandiso Yohle (12), Mzwandile Mfeya (17), and Tando Mthambu, 19 year old university student at the University of Durban-Westville.

It is only after proof of the age of the boys surfaced that the government changed their position. Geer Mybergh, Deputy Law and Order Minister, then blamed the PAC for their deaths, asserting that the PAC and APLA are "deliberately abusing juveniles for terrorist purposes."

The SACC statement charges that "children, for that is what the victims were, are killed in their home. Then we are asked to believe that the SADF acted 'in good faith'."

No Sign of Struggle

According to the Sicelo Mpendulo the boys had formed a study group and were studying for school examinations on the night of the attack. They would have placed mattresses on the floor of the lounge, watched TV and slept. In fact, several poems and school notebooks were among those things confiscated from the house by the SADF.

The LHR investigatory team claimed that the youths were lying down when they were shot several times each. This challenges the allegation that the boys were "resisting" when they were shot.

The youngest boy was shot 18 times, only in the chest and the head. At least one bullet entered his mouth, indicating that he was probably crying or yelling out

when he was hit.

One of the first journalists at the site said, "when I got there I saw the bodies still lying on their mattresses... There was no sign of a fight or struggle."

According to the LHR, over 100 cartridges were spent by the SADF. No other ammunition was discharged, which dispels the claim that there was a shootout. Furthermore, "the evidence indicates strongly that all the shooting was downward, towards the floor" said the LHR report. This would support the claim of the PAC that the boys were lying down when shot.

The SADF also claims that two AK47's were found in the house with some ammunition. However, according to the SADF the arms were not found in the same room as the boys.

Despite assertions from the SADF to the contrary, there is no evidence to indicate that the house was an APLA "safe house" or "APLA facility."

If it is true that two AK47's were found in the house, two guns do not comprise a military facility. Throughout South Africa, the AWB, the ANC and the SADF are training people in security or military procedure. The AWB has stated that its training is in preparation for a war which is imminent if the ANC wins the election. However, no SADF raid has been waged on its "bases." The SACC statement refers to this use of force "when there are other parts of the nation where local despots are allowed to kill and maim, and make threats of war at will."

Even if it was true that the house was a base for training of APLA members, and there is no evidence to support that assertion, is it justifiable to kill people who offer no resistance? If innocent children are killed in their beds, even by mistake, although the SADF admit this was a deliberate and planned attack, is it acceptable to term it a "successful operation"? If SADF intelligence is so unreliable that private homes are mistaken for military bases, who is safe from their lethal errors?

The law of South Africa states that Transkei is an independent country, although the SA government is the only one in the world

which recognises it as such. Transkei officials say that they were not informed in advance of this raid. If Transkei is independent when it comes to determining

whether their residents can vote in the upcoming elections, why are they not deemed independent when it comes to a deadly military operation within its borders?

The fallout of the attack has been intensive and varied.

The LHR has declared that the raid was an act of murder and that all those responsible for it should be charged and tried with murder.

Over 200 white residents of the Transkei have written a letter to the government stating that the raid has "embarrassed" them and calling for the government to apologise.

The SACC says it looks for "penitence, removal from office and for a day where trust, justice and peace will reign in this land."

Bishop Mogoba called for the South African State President to "dismiss the Minister of Defense who is clearly guilty of a massive political blunder" and the government to set in motion "bilateral negotiations with the PAC to ensure no further attacks occur."

The LHR made several recommendations: 1) making public all information about the raid, 2) reference of the case to the Goldstone Commission for investigation, 3) lodging a formal complaint to the Peace Secretariat for violation of the National Peace Accord, 4) the immediate implementation of legislation for the establishment of the TEC Sub Council on Defense, 5) the removal from office of the Minister of Defense, Mr Kobie Coetsee, and 6) that charges of murder, conspiracy to commit murder, and all related charges being brought against the soldiers involved.

The SACC, as it is all too often called to do, paid for the coffins of the boys killed in the raid. Ms Brigalia Hlope Bam, Acting General Secretary and Mrs Sheila Sisulu, Senior Vice-President of the SACC, both went to Umtata to attend the funeral of the boys. The regional SACC branch, the Transkei Council of Churches, helped organise the funeral held at the Transkei Independent Stadium. One SACC worker reported that Mr Mpendulo had been suspicious due to a Toyota Cressida which had been seen around the house and once fired a shot at him the week before the raid. He had been concerned that the boys should not stay there. But the eldest son of Mr Mpendulo had responded, "If we must die, Baba, let it be at home."

Clergy bury the unknown

By Aisah Bacquie

In Thokoza and Katlehong, not even the dead are allowed peace.

Local pastors and members of the SACC faced problems as they attempted to organise a mass burial for forty unidentifiable charred bodies.

There were over three dozen charred bodies among the corpses in the Germiston morgue of those killed in the political violence of the East Rand. The State wanted to give them pauper's funerals and the town council wanted them cremated.

Ministers intervened. They believed that those people also deserved decent burials. Pastors had serious misgivings about Pauper's Funerals because recent scandals have surfaced of several corpses being put in the same hole and unidentified corpses having been ferreted out to neighbouring white farmers who were paid to plant the bodies in their fields with the understanding that they could later plant over them. Not wanting these people to be used as human fertilizer, the pastors of Thokoza and Katlehong insisted that they be able to conduct a proper burial service for these violence victims.

The desire of the pastors, however, was not necessarily shared by all those in the affected communities. Thokoza and Katlehong have long been strong ANC-aligned areas. Even the electricity boxes on the sidewalk are painted black, green and gold. Therefore, the recent violence in the area is perceived by many members of the community as the result of an

"invasion" of the Inkatha Freedom Party supported by the security forces.

At the first scheduled service which was postponed because the cemetery's gravedigging machine was not working, I overheard one youth threaten to burn down a pastor's church if he helped bury the charred bodies. The burnt corpses are thought by many to be members of the Inkatha Freedom Party as they were unclaimed. That pastor, Rev Gamndana, was unable to hold the rescheduled service at his church.

The position of the pastors is that God alone knows the identity of each of the unidentifiable people. Some are probably members of the IFP, some of the ANC, some non-aligned. However, they are all God's people and, irrespective of political affiliation, deserve a decent burial. Some members of the local civic and political leadership have been missing for months. Some people were burnt to death in their homes and family members have not gone to the mortuary to identify them. These are all among the dead. Furthermore, they insist, it is the pastoral responsibility of the church to bury them.

At a meeting of all the structures, pastors appealed to all the local political, civic, labour, and community groups to educate their constituencies about the burials. After the threat to Rev Gamndana, they also convened a meeting with township youth to discuss the issue. The meeting withstood impassioned discourse. "Why are you burying our enemies in our cemetery?" the youth demanded to know. "They must go back to where they came from or let the state bury them. You are our abafundis (pastors)." After three hours of heated debate, the young people gave the go-ahead for the burials.

The mass burial was planned for Thursday, September 23rd, 1993. Ministers assembled outside at the NGKA (Reformed Church in Africa) in Thokoza.

They could not bring the bodies into the church because the smell of death was too overpowering. The undertakers had earlier declared their unwillingness to wait another day to bury the bodies as they were already starting to decay.

Two undertakers, collectively in possession of sixteen of the forty corpses, joined the ministers at the church. The third mortician had called that morning and told of his inability to get into the township. The pastors thought they would have to bury the twenty-four bodies he held on another day.

From the church the ministers, international monitors, and SACC staff people proceeded to the Thokoza Cemetery. Three SACC staff who came minutes later were stooped at blockades on the way and asked where they were going by young "comrades". They explained that were from the SACC and were joining local pastors in the burial of unidentified corpses. They were passed on.

Pastors, monitors and church staff spread out so at least one person stood at each grave. Rev Mthlale led a prayer for these unidentified souls, whose families were unaware of their whereabouts and death. He prayed for them to rest in peace. Rev Gift Moerane spoke of the mission of the church to bury the dead, irrespective of whichever, if any, political party to which they belonged. He spoke of how some pastors had justifiable fears of doing this, as evidenced by the threat to Rev Gamndana, but that together, they could fulfil this Christian mission. He closed with a note of tragic irony. Despite how they had died, which political side of the fence they had been on, how much they may have welcomed or hated the inevitable change coming to South Africa, they all lay side by side in the cemetery. The service ended with a song and prayer, the lowering of the bodies into the ground, and the tossing of the handful of earth over the coffins.

Monitors left first. A few minutes later the SACC staff workers led the ministers out. However, unbeknownst to them, the third undertaker believed to be a member of the IFP had arrived at the cemetery with the twenty-four bodies using a route commonly associated with the IFP. This angered the "comrades" who now believed they had been lied to, that the bodies just buried must be those of the IFP.

The SACC staff were questioned about the service and identity of the deceased at three different barricades. "If we find out these bodies were IFP, we'll kill you", threatened one youth crossing

his index fingers. (This African gesture is translated to mean "I swear to the cross" or "God's truth".) The staff drove on, but when they looked back, they saw the ministers held at the first barricade.

SACC staff rushed to look for the ANC Youth league leader in the township, but he was not home. They then rushed to the church where they paged the monitors to return. They called the local Peace Secretariat who hung up on them. They phoned the Joint Operational Control Centre, staffed by members of the security forces, ANC and IFP, who insisted on a written report before they could consider going into such a dangerous area. They spoke to the local ANC Peace desk who agreed to send someone immediately.

They prayed.

Minutes later the pastors arrived at the church with the monitors. After twenty minutes of being "held", the pastors had successfully negotiated their departure with the "comrades" after the comrades had pulled out an AK47 on them, threatening to shoot. "If I didn't know you, Mothlale, I'd kill you now." one youth had said.

The twenty-four bodies were later buried under police supervision. Hours later, there were reports that some youth had attempted to exhume the bodies. Again, the ANC sent a person to speak to the young people, successfully dissuading them from that gruesome course.

The unbridled violence now plaguing South Africa has extended even beyond death. It is only in an atmosphere where death is not seen as punishment enough for your enemy that one hears reports of bodies stolen from mortuaries or exhumed and mutilated. This attempt to bury the dead is a graphic indication of the herculean task facing the churches of South Africa, the painful lessons of healing and tolerance.

The promise of a New Heaven and a New Earth (Isaiah 65), where the children of God will no longer "build houses and others live in them", are far from being realised in the East Rand region of South Africa. That community, one of the strongest and most populated ANC regions in the country, has seen over 1,000 people killed in political violence since the July 3rd announcement of the election date next April, and over 2000 homes abandoned.

By Aleah Bacquin

There is a new and eerie twist to the violence in the East Rand. As is the unfortunate case in many black townships throughout the country where this low-intensity war has mushroomed, communities in the region are attacked under cover of darkness, taxi commuters ambushed in broad daylight.

There are the now classical and commonly ignored allegations from residents that the security forces have taken part in attacks. Residents complain that the security forces do not protect their homes from seizure or attack and shoot indiscriminately at township residents as they drive by. The Independent Board Of Inquiry has received complaints that the Internal Stability Unit (ISU) has occupied some of those abandoned homes. Additionally, vigilant EM-PSA monitors, and even some SADF officers have indicated ISU complicity. Moreover, there is now a case pending against the ISU for torturing their detainees, whom they arrest and detain without charge under the Unrest Area legislation, a de facto regional state of emergency.

But the most alarming difference about the low intensity warfare now raging in the East Rand is that clear lines of demarcation

Victims of Violence and Homelessness

...as attackers illegally occupy homes of fleeing residents

have been established and the homes of those in "captured territories" have been seized. The local National Peace Accord structure, the Wits Vaal Peace Secretariat, works with a map in their office which marks boundaries of ANC and IFP controlled areas. Operating in the area without knowledge of those boundaries or without consultation with a particular party, could likely mean death.

"No-go" Areas

Life inside the "no-go" areas is controlled even to the smallest detail. In one section, all residents walk in the street to show they "belong" there. If someone is seen walking on the sidewalk, it is immediately known that he or she is from another area, and he or she can be shot. Pastors cannot minister to parishioners on the "other side" of Kumalo Street which separates the township into ours and theirs. Some churches have even been forced to close their doors.

IFP supporters are not allowed into ANC controlled areas, and vice-versa. No one from the "wrong" side of Kumalo Street can cross to the other side to buy groceries or even leave via taxi. Presently, commuters to nearby Johannesburg must switch taxis at least three times, as no one taxi can or will safely travel across the "no-go" area.

The difference in freedom of movement occurs when people from outside the township enter these areas. For the most part, any person can enter an ANC area, as long as they do not approach from the IFP area. However, those entering the IFP area without prior consultation have been threatened with death, abducted into the hostel, beaten, shot at, and even killed.

Residents of certain sections of Thokozza, mostly those nearest to the hostels, have received verbal and written threats to leave their homes, and demands for money or forced membership to the IFP. Furniture and property was looted. Members of the

community allege that attacks against local residents are launched from those occupied houses.

Reports from residents are that at first they were given seven days to leave, and now they are told only three days in advance. Residents say that the threats are coming from the IFP. However, a closer analysis suggests that more than one source is responsible for the threats and schemes forcing people to vacate their homes.

Some of the threatening letters have been written in poor Sesotho. One such letter promised that a bomb would be planted in the hostel compound, blowing up all houses in the neighbouring vicinity. Therefore, it went on to say, the resident should vacate her home for her own safety. Other letters written in Zulu simply promised death if the homeowners dare remain.

However, Thokozza residents have also reported that people travel through the township in the middle of the night with loudspeakers warning that "the Zulus are coming." In instances like this, references to Zulus are considered references to supporters of the Inkatha Freedom Party, despite the fact that there are Zulus with membership to the ANC, PAC, and AZAPO.

Hostel residents also report that threats that "the Communists are coming" are heard in their area late at night. Several monitors have indicated that these loud speaker threats are coming from members of the ISU riding in armoured vehicles. "You are being made to kill each other," one monitor said in a meeting of all the political, civic, labour, and community structures in the area.

Despite awareness of written threats to vacate houses on specified dates, security forces neglected to protect the affected communities and they were attacked. The East Rand reaction sharply contrasts the SADF "protection" of white homes away from the Boksburg cemetery during the Mabi burial service. In Boksburg, there was

a long line of SADF troops outside the cemetery "guarding" white homes from the perceived threat. In Thokoza, on nights when attacks were promised, the SADF were nowhere to be seen.

The SADF is available for helping people to vacate their homes, however. They arrive with large trucks on arranged dates and terrified residents carry all they can before the threatened arrival of the attackers. No SADF officer has offered a serious explanation as to why they are available to help people out, but not to help them stay.

Refugees

At the neighbouring Palm Ridge Community Centre, where the Indian community has agreed to house refugees from Thokoza and Kaitshong, dozens of families await assistance and eventual return to their homes, those that are still left standing. The common room of the centre is full of mothers and their children on blankets. Fortunately for them, contributions of clothes from individuals and blankets from Operation Hunger and the International Red Cross are adequate to address their immediate needs. Food is provided at the centre and a health clinic is located on the grounds.

Cecil Moeng, a volunteer helper with the refugees, says, "The problems we are encountering now are beyond our capacity to address. People are traumatised. Mem-

bers of the IFP came here last week with guns. The police patrol only on occasion and the people are left with no protection."

The centre has no phone available for the refugees and there is no transportation for them to visit the mortuary to identify deceased loved ones or their injured beloved in hospital. The local provincial authority has sent no social workers there to counsel the refugees.

Women at the centre spoke after an agreement that only their first names would be used. According to Florence, "opposite my house they burnt four houses. All of the people near Unit F are out because we are next to the hostels. Nobody's there in Unit F because if they see you they'll shoot you". When asked who "they" are, Florence closes her eyes, shaking her head from side to side. "I CAN'T say, she says, "I CAN'T say. They don't want us to enter there, even to go and see your house. My children...some are in Springs, others in Dube. We are separated. I'm just alone here."

However, her troubles do not end there. Must she continue to make mortgage payments on a house she can no longer occupy? "My house is not burnt. I left my house there. The bank says I can do nothing."

The local town council reports that people whom they believe are illegally occupying homes have called for the resumption of utility services which were cut off at the

request of the owners after they were forced out. Some of the occupants even claim to be paying the mortgages!

The town council, which owns the hostels, has encouraged people to fill out written complaints which they then take to the magistrate for orders of eviction. The eviction notices are sent to the police sergeant who is supposed to evict the illegal occupants. To date, no one has been evicted nor charged with any offense related to the forceful occupation of homes.

The IFP has vehemently denied any involvement in the forceful occupation of homes. One local IFP official said, "The whole thing is ANC propaganda. That's all it is." She further states that the "IFP is not involved in the forceful occupation of homes, but we are not going to stop homeless people from occupying vacant houses."

Missing Husband

The Independent Board of Inquiry report into the situation clearly states that members of the IFP are taking over homes. And, recent news reports on the story indicate that the IFP members illegally occupying those homes have threatened to burn them down if forced to leave.

Nomsa (not her real name) is deeply troubled by the fact that her husband has been missing since August 6th of this year. "I saw him on August 5th. He came here to visit me and the children." She suspects that he might be dead because others told her they had seen him attacked by a mob. She is without transportation to the hospital or mortuary to check if he is among the living or the dead.

Nomsa woodenly recounts her night of terror. "I saw my neighbour's houses burnt and then I ran away. I thought I'd be safe here. I'm scared to stay there," she said of her house in Extension 2 of Thokoza. Nomsa ran away in the middle of the night with nothing but her children and the clothes on her back. The children, aged 10 and 13, are not receiving an education because school has been closed since the most recent outbreak of violence.

The situation is now so bad that two of the women I spoke with insisted that they would not return. They said the church should assist them in finding another place to stay in peace. "I don't want that place anymore; it is too dangerous for us," one refugee said. "We can't go back unless they remove the hostel," said another.

The challenges of the Transition Period and the following New South Africa that every one speaks of are much larger than appear at first glance. How much more challenging the Council's mission to work for God's sovereignty in South Africa where, as promised in Isaiah 32, God's people will live in peaceful dwelling places, secure homes, and undisturbed places of rest.