Apartheid’s Hidden Hand —
The Power Behind “Black on Black Violence”

“The police are involved in killing us.”
—— Rev. Frank Chikane

Introduction

Almost lost in the euphoria over Nelson Mandela’s release and the talks between his African National Congress and State President F. W. de Klerk’s apartheid government, has been the unrelenting and continuing brutality of the South African army and police.

The respected South African Human Rights Commission recently reported, for instance, that almost half of the incidents of political violence recorded throughout South Africa in the month of August 1990 were caused directly by the army and the police.

As popular resistance to apartheid intensified, the Pretoria regime has added yet another dangerous weapon to its arsenal of repression — Black “vigilante” forces loyal to a handful of traditional chiefs, township councillors and homeland leaders. These forces have thrown in their lot with apartheid, and the Zulu-based Inkatha organization has promoted a conflict that has taken 4,000 lives in the past four years.

In Natal province, supporters of Kwazulu bantustan Chief Gatsha Buthelezi and his Zulu-based Inkatha organization have generated a conflict that has taken 4,000 lives in the past four years. By August 1990, this fighting spread to the Johannesburg area where more than 800 people were massacred within a few weeks.

A shadowy network of government-linked death squads, ultra-rightist paramilitary groups, and police officials has also emerged, targeting anti-apartheid activists, ANC officials, trade unionists, and members of local community groups.

The apartheid government and the media have commonly portrayed the continuing terror as “Black on Black violence;” an explosion of political and tribal rivalries within the anti-apartheid movement that has nothing to do with white minority rule. But the phrase “Black on Black violence,” with its appeals to racist stereotypes of African “tribalism,” obscures more than it explains. It is the more than four decades of policies of apartheid that have sown the seeds of these killings.

A more apt description would be apartheid violence. Whether or not one believes de Klerk himself is behind the killings, there is little doubt that it serves his purposes. Not only does “Black on Black violence” weaken the democratic move to negotiate a settlement, it also allows him to present himself abroad as a moderate centrist caught between white extremism and Black factionalism.

This report details the official complicity of apartheid in the violence. Even Mr. de Klerk was forced to concede the role of a “hidden hand” in these killings. Rev. Frank Chikane, General Secretary of the South African Council of Churches put it more directly: “The police are involved in killing us.”

The Iron Fist

Police Terror

The South African police and security forces have unleashed a reign of terror on the Black population. The South African Human Rights Commission reports that of 210 political conflicts recorded nationally during the month of August 1990 alone, 102 were a direct result of army and police action.

The most devastating violence has taken place in the Johannesburg region, where police and army attacks on anti-apartheid protesters have been pervasive and well documented. Among such cases are:

- On March 26, police opened fire on Black protesters near Sebokeng township near Johannesburg, killing 12 and wounding 281. In a formal inquiry, South African Supreme Court Justice Goldstone declared the police killings criminal and “without justification.”

- On September 4, South African troops killed 11 more Sebokeng residents. A witness to the shooting, journalist Len Khumalo, said, “people came towards [the soldiers] raising their hands, saying ‘peace we are not fighting.’” The troops “took up position, cocked their guns — I thought they wanted to scare the people. All of a sudden there was shooting. Many people ran. Some of the people fell.”

- In the September 14 edition of the conservative newspaper Business Day, journalist Billy Paddock reported on a police patrol in the townships:

  “During one incident, when police were firing tear gas at an unruly crowd, the warrant officer in charge yelled at his men: 
  ‘Not tear gas, shoot the bastards!’ and shotguns roared all round.”

The Police and Inkatha

Since August 1990, South African human rights, religious and media observers have been overwhelmed with accounts of police collusion with Buthelezi’s Inkatha. The Independent Commission of Inquiry into Informal Repression, the International Commission of Jurists, the Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace and dozens of other independent observers have also collected hundreds of affidavits, eyewitness accounts and sworn statements charging police support for Inkatha. Many reports echo the statement issued by the million-member Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) on August 16:

“Since the middle of July we have been warning the authorities in advance of the attacks being planned by Inkatha. Despite this nothing has been done to stop them....Where they have acted, the general perception is that they have assisted Inkatha in their attacks; they have
disarmed Inkatha’s victims and teargassed and shot those trying to defend themselves; they have failed to disarm Inkatha; they have failed to stop criminal acts by Inkatha.”

In one widely reported case, raiders led by Inkatha regional head Themba Khosa killed at least 19 people in a hostel during a dawn assault. Numerous eyewitnesses reported that the attackers were driven to the hostel in police vehicles, and that white officers fired on hostel dwellers who tried to escape.¹³

The Hidden Hand

Government Death Squads

In 1989, South Africa was rocked by revelations that a secret police unit, Unit C1, together with a 200-member army death squad, the Civil Cooperation Bureau (CCB), were responsible for the torture and execution of dozens of anti-apartheid activists.¹⁴

Now there are growing signs that the death squads are only part of a larger network of army counterinsurgency experts, hardline police officers and neo-fascist white paramilitary organizations that reaches deep into the state security apparatus. One expert, Cape Town University Professor Robert Schrirer, estimated that 70 percent of white officers in the South African police are supporters of far-right political parties.

Links to RENAMO

“We are not here dealing with amateurs,” Nelson Mandela said on September 14, “We are actually having in this country the beginning of the RENAMO movement,” — a reference to the South African-backed terrorist organization which has killed over 100,000 people, left millions homeless and laid waste to neighboring Mozambique.¹⁵

The South African Weekly Mail newspaper has uncovered direct evidence of ties between Buthelezi’s Inkatha fighters, RENAMO and the South African Defense Force (SADF). In late September, the Mail revealed that 200 Inkatha members had been trained in urban and guerrilla warfare by SADF officers at a secret base in occupied Namibia during 1986. In October, the Mail reported that RENAMO arms merchants had set up shop in two Inkatha-controlled hostels, where AK-47 assault rifles could be purchased.

Right Wing Groups

At the height of the violence in September, human rights, religious and legal observers were flooded with reports of armed whites transporting and fighting alongside Inkatha. They are presumed to be part of a nebulous right-wing movement determined to violently resist any relaxation of apartheid, a movement currently estimated to include some 70 separate paramilitary and political organizations.

Other white attacks appear to be made independently of Inkatha. From September 2 to 7, for example, police confirmed that a minivan driven by whites and containing armed Black and white men was responsible for a wave of attacks in Soweto, Tokoza and other townships — killing at least 32 people and wounding dozens more. There have also been some 20 bombings attributed to the right wing. The worst incident came on July 6, when a powerful bomb exploded at a Black taxi stand in Johannesburg, injuring 27.

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In September, the ANC demanded a formal investigation of the “hidden hand” and its links to the security establishment — a demand that, a month later, the de Klerk government still refused. Yet there is little reason to believe that such an inquiry would succeed in rooting out the clandestine network. Of the 71 murders on the docket of the six-month Harms Commission death squad investigation, only three were examined.

More ominously, in August, Special Forces commander and founder of two earlier army assassination units, General A. J. Liebenberg, was named army Chief of Staff — the highest rank in the SADF. A week earlier the CCB was officially disbanded and its personnel and equipment transferred — intact — into the Defense Force. Meanwhile, political assassinations have continued.

Gatsha Buthelezi and Inkatha

Any analysis of “Black on Black violence” returns to Natal Province, in the eastern part of South Africa, where the KwaZulu bantustan is situated, and to the role of Gatsha Buthelezi’s Inkatha organization. More people have died in Natal since 1987 than in battle-ravaged Lebanon during the same period, as Inkatha has tried to assert its hegemony by force.

In 1970, Mangosuthu Gatsha Buthelezi became Chief Minister of the so-called Zulu bantustan of KwaZulu, one of the tiny, barren territories the apartheid government set aside as “homelands” for Black South Africans. Under “Grand Apartheid,” the African majority was to lose their South African citizenship, to become citizens instead of their assigned bantustan. At the same time the regime tried to promote the bantustan heads as the real leaders of the people — representing a legitimate political alternative to majority rule.

Buthelezi revitalized a moribund Zulu cultural group, Inkatha, and used it to circumvent the traditional leadership — building a powerful political base in KwaZulu through his control of government patronage, his emotional appeals to Zulu cultural identity, and, when necessary, strong-arm tactics against opponents.

Although he heads an apartheid entity, the KwaZulu bantustan, Buthelezi has always presented himself as an anti-apartheid leader. He often points to his rejection of KwaZulu independence and his support for Mandela’s release from prison as proof of his anti-apartheid credentials.

But there is little else in Buthelezi’s record to support this claim. Instead, he has opposed, sometimes violently, virtually every active form of resistance to apartheid as a challenge to his power. He closed local schools during the Soweto uprising rather than submit to student demands, opposed rent and consumer boycotts.
South African Police in Tokoza Township take no action to arrest or disarm Inkatha member during attack in August 1990. According to hundreds of eyewitness accounts, police repeatedly failed to prevent Inkatha assaults or arrest Inkatha attackers. Township residents charge the police backed Inkatha with shotgun fire and tear gas, and arrested and disarmed ANC supporters.

in the early 1980s, and has been a longtime opponent of international sanctions and corporate disinvestment campaigns. Buthelezi responded to these challenges by unleashing the KwaZulu police on the democratic movement and developing local traditional chiefs into warlords who attacked these new organizations.

His links to the apartheid state are easier to document than his record of opposition. Last year direct South African subsidies to Buthelezi's KwaZulu administration were $600 million — about three-fourths of the total budget. Alone among the leaders of the non-independent bantustans, Pretoria allowed Buthelezi to create a separate tribal police force, the KwaZulu Police, in 1980, under the command of Jac Buchner, a 23-year veteran of the South African security police. Buchner told reporters his job had been to "disrupt the ANC in any way I could and spoil their attempts to bring South Africa down."

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By the mid-1980s, Buthelezi's open collaboration with the South African government had greatly weakened his popularity in Natal — particularly among the more militant urban workers and youth. Support for organizations critical of Buthelezi, including the United Democratic Front and the trade unions began to grow, threatening Inkatha's provincial monopoly of power.

In 1987, Inkatha launched a bloody campaign to neutralize the competition — initiating attacks that have taken 4,000 lives to date. Buthelezi has repeatedly blamed the ANC, the UDF and Cosatu for the violence and has publicly called for peace talks. But at a March 23 meeting with local chiefs he said,

"As from now we should place ourselves on a war footing. We must declare ourselves to be at war with these developments which wish to threaten us and the people who lead it. Going to war against that which threatens us is something we as Zulu leaders understand and it is something which brings out the best of us."

Four days later Inkatha launched the bloodiest attack of the war, sending 2,000 fighters into Caluza and Ashdown townships near Pietermaritzburg, killing 80 people and driving 11,000 from their homes. A non-partisan observer team, the Ad-Hoc Crisis Committee, charged that, "Inkatha forces...have waged a massive, concerted, planned and resourced attack on a number of areas...involving thousands of men, transport and ammunition."

"The police," they charged, "took no effective action to stop the invasion...the police have been extremely gentle with the invaders."

Turmoil in Soweto

The launching of Inkatha as a national political party in July 1990 brought the Natal war to the impoverished Black townships around Johannesburg. The roots of the August violence go back more than one hundred years to the beginning of the migrant labor system. Migrant labor has forced tens of thousands of Blacks to live in single sex hostels, separated from their families for eleven and one-half months of each year. The hostels are often divided into sections for different racial or ethnic groups.

Inkatha has only been able to organize support among migrant hostel dwellers from Natal and the hostels became staging grounds for attacks in the townships. It is now widely accepted that Inkatha initiated the fighting around Johannesburg in a bid to shore up
Buthelezi's flapping claim to national leadership before negotiations for a new, non-racial South African constitution begin. "Inkatha, who precipitated the violence in each of the townships have made their point," wrote London Independent correspondent John Carlin. "Their chief, Mangosuthu Gatsha Buthelezi, will continue to be isolated from the mainstream political process only at an enormous price in human suffering."  

Conclusion

The South African government has always found a way to talk and fight. In October the government finally lifted the State of Emergency in Natal and it continues to pursue negotiations with the ANC. Yet at the same time, under the cover of "Black on Black violence," F.W. de Klerk's "reformist" apartheid government has unleashed a fresh round of repression against South Africa's democratic movement.

During the first eight months of de Klerk's "season of peace" over 2,000 people throughout the country have been killed in political violence. Many have died at the hands of the army and police, while others have been killed by apartheid vigilantes armed, trained, financed and protected by the state.

Ultimately, only the abolition of apartheid can bring an end to the violence in South Africa. But in the meantime, de Klerk must be held to account for the actions of the army and police, and for vigorous prosecution of the members of the "hidden hand." To do less would be to countenance the continuation of apartheid violence by other means.

Footnotes:
1. STAR, 9/5/90
2. Associated Press, 9/4/90
3. Financial Times, 9/05/90
4. SA Death Squads, Lawyers Committee for Civil Rights Under Law, 9/20/90
5. United Press International, 9/14/90
6. Reuters, 7/31/90
7. Weekly Mail 12-19 April 1990
9. The Independent, 20 August 1990