Death in Detention in South Africa

a slip on a stair
a flight through the air
these are the ways
they say we take
now, they found you a hanging
a hanging in your cell
another one who went that way
that's what they say
but we know better
as even your little ones do
you took the way
of the first black martyr
when he refused the yoke
and took death instead
you will be added to the
string of beads we wear
and proudly display when
we sing of the way
a black martyr goes
leading to the time when
we will weave freedom ribbons
in our hair*

† BLACK POET James Matthews wrote this poem a short while ago for his fellow South Africans who have died in detention. The official reasons given for their deaths by the security police are a mockery of the truth. I. Haron “fell down stairs”; N. Kgosthe “slipped in shower”; A. Timol committed “suicide” by jumping through the tenth-floor window of the police interrogation center. Most recently, the deaths of Soweto student J. Maghabane and trade unionist L. Marwembe, both arrested in the wake of the mass uprisings this summer, were termed “suicide by hanging.”

Now James Matthews himself is being held by the South African security police. A letter from South Africa has reached the U.S. expressing the fear that unless there are international cries of protest Matthews may be the next name listed in the annals of the security police as a “suicide by hanging.”

Matthews is one of thousands at present held under South Africa’s draconian security legislation. The laws allow detainees to be kept incommunicado indefinitely, without explanation, without charges being brought, without access to a lawyer, family, priest or doctor. The South African security police have the power literally to make a person disappear, sometimes forever.

The South African government has resorted to extreme brutality in its attempt to suppress the freedom struggle. Hundreds, many of them young schoolchildren, died under a hail of police bullets this past summer. Others are dying under torture in its jails. Yet the South African government is still sensitive to outside opinion because it fears the results of isolation. Thus the Tony award-winning actors Winston Ntshona and John Kani were swiftly released after it became apparent that thousands of actors in this country would demonstrate in protest on October 26 and mar the “independence” ceremony for the Transkei.

The black people of South Africa are not waiting for our goodwill to come and free them. Steeled by the realities of their oppression, they are organizing for the battles they will have to fight to win their birthright. In the words of James Matthews, we do not have dreams
dreams are like flowers
we cannot afford
whose petals will wither
and fall
as would dreams die
if we are foolish enough to cherish dreams the reality we know has no time for flowers or dreams cacti claws clutching flesh blossoms of our nightmares the weight of chains heavy on backs dispel dreams for reality's stead to lay in flowered fields dream-dazed illusionist unmindful of corrupted laws is not a state we share reality demands rid ourselves of all chains then, perhaps, we shall indulge in flower-filled dreams*

We cannot fight the battles, but we can give some protection and support to those who are engaged in the struggle. 

Paul Irish.


The author of the editorial feature on martyrdom in South Africa is Paul Irish, executive associate of the American Committee on Africa and the Africa Fund.

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Readers concerned about Mr. Matthews may write to him care of Police Headquarters, Calendon Square, Cape Town, South Africa. Protests at continued police detention of thousands of South Africans can be sent to:
Ambassador Roelof Botha
S.A. Embassy
3051 Massachusetts Ave., N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20008
Phone (202) 232-4400

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The Africa Fund seeks contributions for the legal defense of political prisoners in South Africa.

"SUICIDE" BY DETAINEE ALLEGED

Mapetla Mohapi, 29, a detainee, died at the Kei Road police station, East London on 5 August 1976. A senior police officer confirmed the death, allegedly caused by Mohapi hanging himself by his jeans. His widow exclaimed "Mapetla can't have done this," and Father Aelred Stubbs of the Community of the Resurrection in Johannesburg, who had met Mohapi while president of the Anglican Theological seminary in Alice, Eastern Cape, said he was not the sort of person who would commit suicide. He had previously stood up to detention and prolonged interrogation without collapsing, Stubbs added, and was "a man of great inner resources, confidence, and commitment to his cause." (IGN 7.8.76; Times 7.8.76; RDM 7.8.76)

Mohapi was first detained in November 1974 and held until April 1975. He was later elected full-time general secretary of the South African Students Organisation (SASO) in Durban, but was banned in September 1975 and restricted to the district of Kingwilliamstown, near East London. (see FOCUS No. 1 p. 4)

Mohapi, who leaves a widow and two young daughters, became the 24th known political detainee to have died in custody, following the death of Joseph Mdluli last March (see FOCUS No. 4, pp 2–3). At the time of his arrest he was administrator of the Zimele Trust which helps to rehabilitate released political prisoners. Arrested on 15 July under the Terrorism Act, he apparently smuggled out three messages to his mother-in-law, none of which gave the impression that he was in an emotional state.

Two private doctors attended the post-mortem, one of whom described it as 'very thorough.' Durban attorney Mr. Griffith Mxenge, who assisted the Mdluli family and was himself detained on 24 March and held without trial until early July, flew to East London to arrange for an independent doctor to attend the post-mortem. No findings have been released yet. (Ibid)

Later Dr. M. Ramphele, who represented the Mohapi family at the post-mortem, was herself detained. (RDM 14.8.76)

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