

Conflict Trends

THE RICHMOND WAR



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The civil violence in Richmond between 1990-1991 has taken place in the context of the ongoing conflict between the ANC and Inkatha in Natal, and more specifically, in the Midlands. This case study demonstrates how a territorial, low intensity conflict has been politicised, exploited and exacerbated. It highlights the mobilisation of the youth, under the auspices of the ANC, and of the chiefs, elders, indunas and farmworkers, under the auspices of the IFP. It is based on a firsthand investigation over an extended period.

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In black residential areas of the Natal Midlands, such as Pietermaritzburg, Richmond, Elandskop, Mooi River and Greytown, progressive organisations, specifically the ANC, have come up against a 'last stand' by traditionalist forces operating in tribal structures. These range from the frontline troops, such as the chiefs, indunas, sangomas and their followers (who almost always are Inkatha supporters), through to clandestine actors, which increasingly appear to be located in the 'murky waters of officialdom' and even in branches of the security forces (see Nathan & Philips in *Indicator SA* Vol8/No4:7-10).

The small country town of Richmond lies just off the national road en route from Pietermaritzburg to the Transkei. The surrounding townships are large, sprawling semi-formal and informal settlements which are home to at least 70 000 black people. Indaleni and Magoda are better serviced and home to many 'semi-skilled', skilled and professional workers who commute to Richmond or Pietermaritzburg daily. N'kobeni, Smozomeni and Pateni are more informal, sparsely settled and home to many displaced, retrenched or full-time agricultural labourers who have been or are still employed on white farms in the area.

There has been a simmering tension between the residents of Indaleni and Magoda, on the one hand, and N'kobeni, Smozomeni and Pateni, on the other. The conflict dates back to 1988, when youths in Smozomeni began to align with the UDF-supporting youth of Magoda and Indaleni. In so doing, they allegedly

incurred the wrath of some powerful community leaders, such as induna Paulos Vezi from Pateni, who is an IFP supporter.

There is remarkably little information on the growing power struggle in Richmond's settlements through 1988-90, but as many as 50 people died during the initial phase of the conflict. This is in comparison to the one conflict fatality recorded earlier between 1985 and 1988.

The Conflict Escalates

In November 1990, a loose alliance between Pateni and N'kobeni was formalised against the youth who were now all situated in Magoda or Indaleni. At this stage, all ANC supporters had fled from Smozomeni as tensions escalated between supporters of the ANC and IFP. In the first six months of 1991 more than 100 people were killed and roughly 50 000 refugees left homeless, under conditions aptly described as civil war (see data: 44-45).

Towards the end of 1990, a number of incidents indicated the increasingly militant reaction in some quarters to ANC mobilisation of the youth. First, a SADF member who was also allegedly an ANC sympathiser was murdered in Indaleni. Soon thereafter, the ANC's Midlands Convener, Harry Gwala, was fired upon while addressing a rally there.

Next, an R4 rifle was seized by the comrades during an attack on an ANC member in Magoda. The comrades maintain that they later handed the rifle to

the police, although the SAP deny their claim. This minor incident was a catalyst for massive destruction and loss of life. It sparked off a spiral of attacks and retaliations, which, fuelled by the additional involvement of agent provocateurs and others, would continue throughout 1991.

On 20 January 1991, the ANC chairman for the area, Sifiso Nkabinde, received a letter from N'kobeni residents, addressed to the ANC at Magoda. It demanded the return of the R4 rifle, saying it was a 'community weapon', and that the attackers who had used it had no authority to do so since their actions had not been mandated by the community of N'kobeni.

The following afternoon Magoda was attacked. Four people were killed, thousands fled and 50 homes were burnt by an impi which allegedly carried an IFP flag and sang songs about killing comrades. At this point Inkatha researchers claimed that the conflict was 'non-political'. The comrades, however, felt that the main reason for the transfer of attention from Smozomeni to Magoda was the growth of the ANC there, as opposed to its virtual 'extermination' in Smozomeni.

This clash marked a turning-point in the conflict. Thousands of refugees crowded into Richmond, living in tents, makeshift shelters and on the streets. The army set up six temporary army bases to separate battle-lines in the black communities of Richmond.

In the struggles which followed, in both the Magoda and Indaleni communities, the homes of ANC members were specifically targeted. Residents claimed they recognised Pateni and N'kobeni residents among the attackers, who were aided by Inkatha supporters in Indaleni. In one case, the impi which attacked had earlier stood at the gates of the Methodist Mission in Indaleni, and according to Reverend Roger Hudson, shouted 'away with the comrades'. The reverend was giving shelter to about 400 refugees on the premises.

The struggle for political supremacy and control was further revealed at a 'peace rally' held in March 1991 in Indaleni, at which David Ntombela, Inkatha leader and Kwazulu MP for Elandskop, stated that returning refugees should report to the chief before re-occupying their homes. He also warned that if youths wanted to join the ANC, they should not bother coming back, but should 'return to the Transkei'. Ntombela later denied that he had said this.

The Refugees Return

In late March, the attempted return of some of the refugees who had fled the Magoda violence in January sparked off a major battle. Pleas for the police to provide an escort to ensure the safe return by bus of 400 ANC supporting-youth who had taken shelter in Pietermaritzburg, fell on deaf ears. The subsequent clash with Inkatha supporters took on epic proportions. It came to be known as the 'Battle of the Forest'.

After the refugee youth were attacked in Indaleni on their return, they unearthed an arms cache and dug into defensive positions in the surrounding forest. Twenty-nine Inkatha supporters were killed in what became a rout as the two heavily-armed groups of ANC and Inkatha supporters, numbering up to 500-strong, fought a pitched battle. Some of the comrades then went on a killing spree which can only be described as 'vengeful and excessive in the extreme'.

Youths attacked strategic points held by Inkatha, eventually forcing them to retreat to N'kobeni, while others focused on easier targets, in particular, residents who had 'collaborated' with Inkatha during their occupation of Indaleni. Despite desperate pleas that they had been forced to join Inkatha in this period, countless people were abducted and summarily executed. Forty bodies were reportedly found by the police, and other victims buried in unmarked graves.

The widespread frustration at the security forces' lack of success in stemming the earlier Inkatha attacks is understandable. But through these actions the ANC in the area lost a great deal of the moral high ground which up to this point was theirs'. Their retaliation was rightfully perceived as a massacre of genocidal proportions.

During the remainder of April and May, Indaleni fell, with the exception of one area, under the control of ANC supporters. In this brief period a degree of 'normality' returned to the violence-stricken region. The period of May, June and July, however, saw the beginning of a 'terror campaign', as unknown agents set out to destabilise and disrupt life in the area. Richmond's open war now took on the form of a series of hit-and-run attacks.

Every attempt to restore some semblance of normality in the community was countered with violent action by known attackers or unidentified assailants. In June, for

Survey data shows that violence in Richmond was aimed at the IFP in 20,9% of cases, at the ANC in 19,4% and the security forces in 7,5%

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Both the ANC and the IFP became reluctant to negotiate once they had established control over areas of Richmond

instance, 16 people were killed on the very eve of planned peace talks. Six more people were killed on the day before the township schools were rescheduled to open in early July. In a third incident, another three victims were killed on the evening before pension payments were to be resumed in the area. The pattern of events was too predictable to be simply a case of coincidence.

When the pensioners were attacked, some twenty witnesses identified two Inkatha members as leading the culprits. The police, however, maintained that the alleged killers could not be arrested as they were simply protecting their homes against the comrades, and further, were the sole breadwinners for their families. It was only after the ANC staged a protest march that 13 men were arrested.

In later attacks, the assailants not only identified themselves as Inkatha people, but left an identity document belonging to an N'koben resident along with a bloodied axe at the scene of the killings. The obvious trail of clues not only indicated the extent to which the conflict had become overtly political, but also that there was probably more to these clandestine attacks than meets the eye.

The stakes were raised ominously higher in the third quarter of 1991 with the murders of two prominent leaders. First, in August, Chief Jerome Ndlovu, a central member of Inkatha in the Midlands, was assassinated by unknown agents. Then, the chairman of Inkatha in the Richmond area, Ndodi Thusi, was murdered in even stranger circumstances. Amidst the collapse of law-and-order in the area, no-one has been charged by the police or claimed responsibility for the assassinations.

Compromise for Peace

Earlier in 1991, when Inkatha supporters controlled large parts of Indaleni, Inkatha had seemed uninterested in participating in peace talks. Numerous attempts to identify and locate Inkatha leaders proved fruitless, until the police were called in and managed to establish contact. Some progress was made at an early meeting, with Inkatha leaders undertaking to look into the looting and attacks. Despite this, the N'koben attacks had continued.

The Inkatha delegation never attended any of the three meetings scheduled thereafter. Their failure to do so was interpreted by

most residents as a reluctance to negotiate away the control which they had established over Indaleni.

The attempts by regional leaders to address the situation also failed. It became evident that a lasting, meaningful peace settlement would have to be generated and implemented by the community itself. The prospects of realising peace were again dashed on 7 April, however, when 2 000 residents attended a meeting but failed to reach consensus. In the light of Inkatha's apparent new preparedness to negotiate, this was a tragic turn of events.

But just as Inkatha had been reluctant to compromise from a position of power, the ANC too was unwilling to bargain from a position of strength, once it had wrested control over Indaleni from Inkatha.

In September, a 'reconstruction committee' was formed out of an existing crisis committee which drew together representatives of the Richmond town council, local businessmen, the ANC, Inkatha, and other interest groups. The fact that the violence in the area had subsided noticeably by the third quarter of 1991 encouraged new efforts to negotiate a peaceful resolution to the conflict.

Events at Richmond indicate that a broad-based settlement at the grassroots level holds out the best prospects for a lasting peace. The national peace accord signed by most of South Africa's political groups on 14 September has not had a perceptible impact on the ground in Natal. Dispute resolution committees within the framework of the accord have not been set up in any of the three major flashpoints, namely Richmond, Port Shepstone or Inanda.

Questions about the role of the security forces and agent provocateurs have been prominent in the Richmond conflict. It was reported in June that people in a vehicle with 'taped over number-plates' fired at comrades, for instance, while another man who survived an attack made a statement that he heard English being spoken by an assailant who was wearing police camouflage clothing.

Three witnesses stated that they saw police vehicles off-loading armed people, and the type of spent cartridges found after the massacre of sixteen people on 23 June, also raised suspicion. In another development, Inkatha claimed that an SADF member was involved in an attack by comrades on IFP

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member, Paulos Vezi's house, although police deny this.

Allegations of security force bias are not new, though the consequences of these reports have been as devastating to communities as the proven involvement of security forces. Accusations first arose after the inundation of security personnel into the area in February 1991. The majority of SAP and SADF members were deployed in Magoda and Indaleni, where they cracked down on residents; people who to all intents and purposes were the victims of the attacks and who were also ANC supporters.

Allegations of SADF whippings and police assault were widespread. Residents began to question their failure to stop the attacks or to arrest known attackers, alleging that a heavy police presence would disappear from the area minutes before an attack.

The alleged inaction by the security forces featured constantly in eye-witness accounts. Pleas to the local SAP to place a vehicle and men between N'kobeni and Magoda to prevent further attacks proved fruitless. It was only when the former Minister of Law and Order was personally contacted that some vehicles were placed there, but even then, only for a period of one week during daylight hours.

Refugees also accused the police of harassment, saying that a number of Casspirs had tried to prevent them from leaving Magoda when an attack was rumoured to be imminent.

Perhaps the most sinister development of all was the sudden appearance of swastika-like Afrikaner Weerstandsbeweging (AWB) emblems, sprayed over ANC graffiti on a number of school walls in Indaleni. While the SADF refuted allegations of involvement, an SADF commandant stated that there was a strong AWB presence in the town of Richmond and that some farmers had allegedly 'retaliated against the ANC slogans which have been sprayed on the wall'.

Another SADF member confirmed reports of 'people in blue and brown uniforms doing irregular things ... and actively taking part in specific incidents, though no substance to these allegations has been found'. Spent shells found at the scene of an attack in July were found to be privately manufactured, and of the sort used by many local farmers for hunting the wild game found in the Umkomaas Valley.

Residents also allege that a number of AWB camps have been attended by local farmers, police and soldiers too. Lieutenant Meding from the Richmond CID confirmed that he had attended such a camp, but offered another explanation, saying that local farmers had asked the security police to demonstrate the use of 'terrorist weapons'. Revelations in the media subsequently led to a magisterial inquiry.

It was further explained that the farmers had attended in their private capacity, or as members of the Umkomaas Commando. The AWB had arrived in full regalia, unannounced and uninvited. They had attempted to take over proceedings, which they were prevented from doing. They were, however, permitted to participate in the activities. There has thus been some confirmed contact between the AWB and the police in the area. Clarification of the exact nature of this relationship is essential.

Towards Reconstruction

Today, it would appear that the Richmond communities are finally on the way to normalisation, although much hard work still needs to be done. In a significant breakthrough, the Development Bank recently announced it was setting aside one million rands to promote socio-economic reconstruction in the area. The planned development and upliftment of these crowded settlements will undoubtedly enhance the peace process.

The current emphasis of local politics has shifted to the way in which community structures, or what is left of them after the violence, are incorporated into the development process. The local ANC branch, for instance, claims that it is under-represented on Richmond's 'reconstruction committee' and a non-participant on professional development structures like the the local regional development advisory committee.

The issues of civic participation in the politics of development will have to be worked through in the months to come. In the interim, the Richmond communities remain highly mobilised, volatile and vulnerable. Our understanding of the underlying dynamics, of the catalysts and resolution of the conflict, remains incomplete, despite close monitoring of the situation. The way in which the Richmond and other civil conflicts in Natal can be turned on and off like a tap remains a dark puzzle that has yet to be fully solved. IDVA

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