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The onslaught against the people's organisations
September 1984-June 1985

Presented by Descom 8/9 June 1985

Comrades and friends, I have been asked to outline the present onslaught which the state is waging against our organisations and to suggest some ways in which we in the progressive movement can try to deal with this onslaught.

In the past many activists took the activities of the police as an occupational hazard. As something unpleasant, but not as something that we were in a position to do anything about. The struggles waged by the Detainees support committees and other progressive organisations against detentions, and torture, did not succeed in doing away with the security laws in our country, but they did win some improvements in the conditions under which detainees were held and more important they did increase the price which the South African government had to pay both locally and internationally for its repressive policies.

As a result of these struggles, we saw a period when the state went to great lengths to hide detentions from the public and to charge activists with minor offences in order to justify detentions.

Since September last year all this has changed. In the face of rising opposition to Apartheid, the regime has embarked on a campaign to smash the people's organisations.

If our organisations are to withstand this onslaught, it is important not only to strengthen our structures, but also to look at direct ways to combat this onslaught.

First let us look at the different forms that this onslaught is taking:

*Continued police and army occupation of our townships

Townships in the Transvaal, Free State, Northern and Eastern Cape have been continually occupied by the police and the SADF ever since the SADF invaded Sebokeng with 7 000 troops at the end of October last year. Hippos, caspirs and army vehicles have become such a common sight that they no longer raise an eyebrow. In the smaller towns in the Eastern Cape, the SADF have set up semi-permanent

bases. In the East Rand townships of Duduza, KwaThema and Ratanda, SADF conducted house to house searches and in Duduza, arrested all males between the ages of ten and twenty.

Campaign of terror against the township population

At least 400 people have been killed since September last year. The majority of these people have been shot by the police. 10 000 people have been arrested and charged with Public Violence. Many of these

[Handwritten signatures]

people were the victims of indiscriminate shootings and were arrested when they went to the hospital for treatment.

Hundreds more have been injured and are forced to resort to dangerous backyard operations because they fear going for medical treatment.

Detention of leadership

The leaders of the people's organisations have been detained or arrested and kept for long periods of time as awaiting trial prisoners

In the Vaal triangle over sixty detainees have been held for nearly nine months under Section 29 of the Internal Security Act. This is clearly an attempt to smash organisations by depriving them of their leadership.

16 leaders of the UDF are currently facing charges of Treason. They were kept for several months as awaiting trial prisoners and were only released on strict bail conditions which prevent them from engaging in the activities of the Front and its affiliates

Deaths in detention and mysterious disappearances

Since the tricameral parliament first sat, eleven people have died in detention. At least five people have disappeared without trace. Three of these people are executive members of the Port Elizabeth Black Civic Organisation who went to the airport one Wednesday night four weeks ago and never returned. Another missing person is Soweto Cosas member *Eddie Maluleki* who together with a friend was returning to Soweto by train from a journey to town. The two were separated in the crowded train. When their friend arrived at their destination he found that *Maluleki* was missing. He reports seeing plain clothes policemen searching passengers on the train..

Creation of inter-organisational rivalry

The system has embarked on a campaign to promote conflict between different organisations opposed to apartheid.

The SABC and the commercial press have played a mischievous role in promoting this conflict: they have reported the distribution of fake pamphlets without mentioning that the organisations concerned denied issuing these pamphlets; they have distorted reports of so-called UDF, Azapo clashes and they have focused a lot of attention on 'black on black' violence. This has had the effect of hiding the role that the SAP and SADF have been playing in the townships. It has also been part of an attempt to paint the SAP and SADF as the protectors of the people against conflicting groups of vigilantes. It has allowed the press to ignore the real causes of unrest in the townships.

This smear campaign has also allowed the system to petrol bomb the houses of leading activists and to attack their families.

Creation of divisions between residents

A frightening part of the government's strategy has been to promote divisions between different sections of the community. The most horrific example of this is the role the system played in promoting tensions between hostel dwellers and township residents in Tsakane township on the East Rand. Here bloody clashes led to the death of 16 people, an incident much exploited by the press and television to discredit community struggles.

Creation of community guards

Not content with the continual presence of the SADF and SAP, several Councillors have announced the formation of community guards to 'enforce law and order'

UCASA president, Steve Kgare, has made it quite clear that these law enforcement officers, as he calls them, will be involved in 'unrest'

Residents have good reason to fear the brutality of these guards. In Thabong in the Free State, gangs of vigilantes which include councillors and priests have been terrorising residents in an effort to smash community struggles. Several people including elderly people and children have been badly beaten and some have been shot.

What can we do in response to this onslaught?

In the past Descoms have supported the victims of repression and their families, by giving moral and material support. This is still an important function of DEscoms and DPSC's. It is important that members of our organisations feel they are still supported even when they are detained or jailed. It is also important that we support the parents and families of these people so that they cannot be used by the system to pressurise the detainee in any way.

Education of all activists of security laws and their rights is also an important aspect of Descom work. This helps activists to withstand intimidation.

In Soweto where the system has tried to intimidate members of Soyco especially new members, Detainees Aid Movement has tried to overcome this by education and also by encouraging all members of all organisations to report all forms of harassment and intimidations to their leaders.

This is one way to prevent the system creating divisions in an organisation

But the scale of repression means we cannot stop Descom work at moral and material support for the victims of repression. One of the ways in which the system is trying to hide its activities is by

preventing this information from getting into the press. A new regulation makes it an offence for a journalist to write about police or army activities unless he or she has actually seen them. The only way such information can be published is if it is confirmed by Pretoria.

This makes it very important for activists to collect information about all forms of repression and to document it carefully. It also means it is very important to develop good relations with progressive journalists especially in outlying areas where there are only very reactionary newspapers.

In times of crisis, Descoms need to investigate setting up crisis support committees. In the Vaal a crisis support committee was set up to provide legal and medical assistance and also to help families trace detainees and document the stories of the victims of repression. This support work played a valuable role in supporting organisations in the area.

Conclusion

Comrades, in conclusion we welcome the formation of a Detainees Support Committee in your area and look forward to working with you in our common struggle for the

unconditional release of all detainees and political prisoners, the repeal of all security laws and the creation of a just and democratic South Africa.

DESCOM — Pictsburg

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