

CONFERENCE ON THE FUTURE OF SECURITY AND DEFENCE  
IN SOUTH AFRICA

THE CONDUCT OF THE SOUTH AFRICAN SECURITY FORCES  
Police, military and para-military operations  
inside South Africa

*ANC Background Paper*

In the last decades South Africa has seen successive mass uprisings and associated repression, each of which has been more intense, violent and widespread than the previous phase. The periods of relative peace between these phases have been increasingly short, and violent conflict has been endemic since 1984. Even now violence continues and repressive forces remain extensively deployed.

The response of the South African government to these periodic crises, which have their roots in popular rejection of apartheid and its local effects, has until recent months been to extend progressively more repressive powers to the armed forces and to deploy them in greater strength. The new political conditions including the legalisation of the ANC and other previously banned organisations, and the move towards the normalisation of the political situation should entail the decisive break with the responses of the past.

*Forces deployed*

The South African government has at its disposal a wide range of armed units. These include military forces in the SADF, the bantustan units, and police forces, chiefly the SAP and its auxiliaries and reserves. As well as these forces directly at the

disposal of the central government or its satellite administrations, there are large and growing numbers of private security units and informal armed formations which differ widely but are generally referred to as 'vigilantes'. As a result of extensive militarisation during the past two decades, hundreds of thousands of whites have been brought into the armed forces on a part-time basis, and most white adults also have access to privately-owned guns.

The strength of these armed forces is difficult to quantify exactly, and the government does not release comprehensive figures. Government figures put the strength of the SAP at over 60,000 (almost half black) with 40,000 reserves (mostly white).<sup>1</sup> There are in addition an estimated 15,000 auxiliaries in the form of Special Constables and the units which used to constitute the Municipal Police as well as bantustan forces. The parliamentary Standing Committee on Law and Order has disclosed that there are between 250,000 and 300,000 private security personnel, who thus vastly outnumber the police.<sup>2</sup>

No official figures are released for the SADF, but ANC researchers estimate that at the end of last year there were approximately 70,000 National Servicemen (this will soon be halved); 60,000 Permanent Force personnel; 300,000 part-time Citizen Force members and 400,000 part-time Commandos. Apart from the Permanent Force, virtually all personnel are white. Although full mobilisation of part-time forces would be practically impossible, it is evident that the government has amassed a vast armed force and militarised a large section of white society. General Malan stated last year that half a million troops could be mobilised if necessary.

### *Deployment of armed forces*

Until the 1980s military forces were usually held in reserve and not openly used in internal operations, although a general mobilisation took place during the 1960 State of Emergency. It was the regular SAP which was responsible for the Sharpeville Massacre and the killings in Soweto and other townships during 1976-7, which left an estimated 1,000 dead.<sup>3</sup> Militarised SAP units were also extensively used for counter-insurgency and other military tasks in Namibia and what was then Rhodesia.

In the suppression of the 1976-7 uprising, the police employed para-military tactics. Spearheaded by the Riot Squads, and armed mainly with rifles, police in camouflage uniform patrolled in vehicles, firing on groups of people and breaking up demonstrations and funerals. While no accurate statistics are available, it is clear that many of the victims were children, and that many people were shot for little or no reason.<sup>4</sup>

While some changes were made in police tactics subsequently, notably through the more widespread issue of less lethal equipment, the para-military nature of police operations continued, and by the mid-1980s virtually all police patrols in townships were conducted from armoured personnel carriers such as the Casspir.

The SADF was first deployed in townships on a wide scale in 1984, indicating the inability of the SAP to curtail popular resistance to the local aspects of apartheid (e.g. Black Local Authorities). Military intervention led to a state of siege in many townships, which were sealed off and subjected to

house-to-house searches. Shortly after the deployment of the SADF, the government banned all information about joint SADF-SAP operations. The attitude of the security establishment to the unfolding crisis was summed up by the then Minister of Law and Order, Louis le Grange, who declared: 'As far as we're concerned it is war, plain and simple.'

The declaration of the State of Emergency in certain areas in July 1985 gave the SADF and police far-reaching powers of arrest and detention, largely outside of judicial and public scrutiny. A total of 35,000 troops were deployed in townships during 1985 alone.<sup>5</sup> Further powers were extended to the SADF later on. The distinction between the police and SADF was largely eroded as joint patrols were mounted, equipment was shared, Joint Operational Centres were established and troops were given powers previously reserved for the police.

The nationwide State of Emergency of June 1986 marked a further intensification of repression and a concerted effort to destroy community, youth and other popular organisations. Emergency regulations became increasingly severe, organisations and individuals were restricted, meetings and funerals banned, information repressed and a climate of fear generated by extremely brutal security force actions and the activities of vigilante groups which in many instances were shown to be encouraged by the police. Routine actions by the security forces included the harassment and detention of community leaders and activists, the disruption of meetings and funerals, attempts to break stayaways and consumer boycotts, the enforcement of curfews, roadblocks, house-to-house searches and the occupation of school premises. Over 20,000 people are estimated to have been detained

during the State of Emergency after 1986 - the Human Rights Commission has calculated that only two percent of these were convicted of any offence.<sup>6</sup>

From all parts of the country, church organisations, monitoring structures, lawyers and the media received countless reports of brutality by the security forces, including beatings, torture, rape, abduction and attacks on children. Notorious incidents, such as the massacres at Kabokweni and Langa and the 'Trojan Horse' case, were only some of the worst examples of violence that was perpetrated throughout the country on a daily basis for years, particularly during the period between September 1984 and December 1988. Press and police statistics indicated at least 1,000 fatalities at the hands of the security forces during this period, in addition to the average of 100 people killed by the police 'in the course of their duties' but not in 'unrest' situations.<sup>7</sup>

An analysis of security force violence shows that although all structures have been responsible for violence, some units and formations are particularly to blame. In general, the police have a reputation for brutality greater than that of the SADF, and within the police the Riot Squads and the 'Special Task Force based in Pretoria have been implicated' in some of the worst excesses. The Special Constables, or 'kitskonstabels' and the Municipal Police, who have been deployed after only rudimentary training, have been responsible for widespread violence, indiscipline and lawlessness, and certain bantustan units have at different times responsible for extensive violence. The Security Branch has been implicated in most of the reported cases of torture of detainees, as well as assassinations and other illegal activities. The SADF-

controlled Civil Co-Operation Bureau (CCB) has been involved in a systematic campaign of assassinations and 'dirty tricks'.

*The current situation*

With the exception of Natal, very few SADF troops remain deployed in the townships, although the SADF has been mobilised Bophuthatsana to shore up the Mangope regime in Bophuthatswana. Police remain deployed in large number and are continuing para-military operations. The law, specifically the Internal Security Act, continues to give the police extensive powers to break up demonstrations and meetings and detain people without trial. During the past months there have been several major incidents in which police have violently broken up apparently peaceful demonstrations and gatherings, with resultant injury and loss of life.[details to be inserted]

In Natal, the police must bear much of the responsibility for the breakdown of law and order. There is extensive evidence of SAP and Kwazulu Police (ZP) complicity with Inkatha vigilante attacks, and it is notable that where police or army units have shown a willingness to operate impartially, they have been withdrawn after remonstrations from Inkatha. Virtually all those involved in monitoring the situation and in efforts to restore peace to Natal are agreed that there is an urgent need to deploy a force which will operate impartially and with the confidence of the people, and that the police cannot play this role. It is because of the discredited nature of the SAP and ZP that democratic structures on the ground initially welcomed the deployment of SADF conscript units in some areas of Natal. However, De Klerk's action in deploying 32 Battalion, a unit of Angolan mercenaries

recently withdrawn from Namibia where it had a fearsome reputation for intimidation and violence against civilians, is likely to destroy any faith in the SADF as an impartial force.

#### *Command and control*

The lack of public accountability by the security forces has undoubtedly contributed to their violent and brutal conduct. The the State of Emergency in particular, with the indemnity from prosecution extended to the security forces and the ban on reporting of security force actions, created conditions in which police and military personnel felt they could take the law into their own hands. The Internal Security Act, which allows for incommunicado detention without trial and gives wide discretionary powers to the police, also forms a basis for excesses and violence.

Police and army actions have until very recently been co-ordinated in secret by the National Management System and its Joint Management Centres, answerable only to the State Security Council, which in turn meets secretly and is dominated by security personnel. Even major strategic decisions, such as that to impose the State of Emergency, have apparently been taken by this structure. Despite De Klerk's announcement that this structure has been abolished similar if less formal secret structures continue to exist.

#### *The challenge*

The conduct of the security forces has been characterised by violence, intimidation and brutality. As presently constituted the SADF, the SAP and their ancilliary organs do not enjoy the confidence of the

vast majority of South Africans and are unsuitable as instruments of law and order during a transition to a democratic system.

A police force is of course needed in any society to enforce the law and maintain public order. However, the SAP and its offshoots have been militarised and deployed to enforce apartheid and have increasingly taken on the role of repressing popular resistance rather than fighting crime. All police, for example, are given military-style riot control and counter-insurgency training, and crime rates have climbed as the police have increasingly been used to suppress political resistance.

In common with most countries, the role of the military should be external defence and not internal repression, and it should represent in its ranks and officer corps all sections of society. The police should be demilitarised and their role in enforcing apartheid and suppressing democratic political activity abolished. This will especially affect highly militarised and politicised units such as the Security Branch, the Special Task Force and the Riot Squads. The position of ill-trained and ill-disciplined auxiliaries such as the 'kitskonstabels' also needs to be closely examined.

Monitoring and control of a demilitarised police is the other vital aspect to ensure proper conduct. Public accountability, control through civil authority and the abolition of repressive legislation are essential if the police are to perform a law and order role <sup>rather</sup> than para-military and repressive tasks.

References



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