

WORKING FOR PEACE

In July, Rifleman Alan Dodson, serving a one month camp in the No 1 Reconnaissance Unit in Durban, refused an order from his superior officer to go on vehicle patrol. At his court martial two weeks later, Alan was sentenced to a fine of R600.

As SADF troops are used more extensively in the townships and given greater powers under the State of Emergency, the crisis of conscience experienced by national servicemen like Rifleman Dodson is becoming more acute.

Debate

In consequence the debate around the system of compulsory conscription and the presence of troops in the townships has intensified.

On the one side of this debate are those who argue that conscription and the troops are necessary to maintain law and order and to deal with criminal elements in the townships.

According to the military tribunal that court-martialled Dodson, "the SADF is trying to protect the lives and property of other citizens who have not the wherewithal to do this".

Ken Owen believes that the SADF is one of PW Botha's instruments to suppress revolution (Sunday Times 18/8/85). Campaigns against conscription and militarisation, like the murder of black policemen and councillors, are intended to deny Botha this instrument.

On this side of the debate there are also many soldiers who, never having been into a township in peace and friendship, now go in with a gun and a sense of absolute power. Trained to kill the enemy, they are confronted by ordinary people whose lives are completely foreign to them and whose suffering and anger they do not understand.

On the other side of the debate is Rifleman Dodson.

Alan went into the army after school and did 14 months border duty for which he received the Pro Patria medal. He then studied law at Pietermaritzburg University and graduated B Comm.LLB cum laude in 1983.

He was extremely perturbed when he reported for a camp this year and was briefed, in racist language, that his unit might have to assist the police in nearby townships. Alan immediately informed the unit's welfare officer that he was not prepared to do this and was told that his views would be accommodated as far as possible.

This arrangement applied until the end of July when he was given an order that conflicted in a fundamental way with his conscience. Alan disobeyed the order.

Root Causes

At the court martial, his lawyer argued that his views were not exceptional. Like Alan, there are many conscripts who find it intolerable to have to take up arms against fellow South Africans.

They feel that the primary role of the SADF, which occupies Namibia as well as SA's townships, and is involved in forced removals and arrests of African people on pass law and influx control offences, is to defend apartheid.

They know that the army, which fires teargas at funeral mourners and assaults and kills township residents, has not brought peace to the townships, but fear and further conflict.

Many conscripts know that the use of troops is no solution to the escalating cycle of violence and that it is futile to apportion blame for this violence either on individual troops or residents. A just and enduring peace will only prevail when the troops are withdrawn and the root causes of conflict - minority rule and the system of apartheid - are eradicated.

They know that the political problem of apartheid requires political, not military, solutions. They understand that the violence of apartheid is the real reason for black resistance, even if they do not agree with all the forms the resistance takes. And they therefore find it morally repugnant to have to participate in attempts to crush it.

Alternatives

Yet under current legislation there are no adequate alternatives to national service. Community service can only be granted by the Board for Religious Objection to Christian pacifists. Those who object on moral or ethical grounds are sent to jail for six years or have to leave SA forever.

The call for an end to conscription and for the provision of acceptable alternatives has therefore been made by a wide range of organisations and institutions: the Black Sash, all of the mainline churches, the PFP, the UDF, and the groups that make up the End Conscription Campaign.

The ECC was formed at the end of 1983 as a broad front of organisations united around the calls for an end to conscription and for a just peace in our land. The campaign has experienced dramatic growth and now has six regional branches and 46 member organisations.

The ECC's opposition to conscription is based on the fundamental belief that individuals should be free to choose whether or not to serve in the SADF.

This belief is solidly founded in international principles, contained in the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights and the Nuremberg Principles, which recognise the right of freedom of choice with regard to the taking up of arms and the taking of life.

The ECC is saying quite simply to the Government: give young men the right to choose. And until this happens at least allow soldiers their right to refuse to go into the townships.

Fast

Along with many of these soldiers, it too believes that the political grievances of South Africans should be redressed, not repressed.

In the next three weeks - from the United Nations International Day of Peace on the 17 September to the anniversary of the troops' entry into the townships on 7 October - young men in four centers who face conscription will fast in support of the ECC's call for the withdrawal of troops from the townships and for a just peace in South Africa.

~~Conscientious objector Richard Steele, who was to have fasted in Durban, has been detained under Section 29 of the Internal Security Act, along with three other prominent ECC members.~~

~~Yet Richard Steele believes that we cannot allow state intimidation to make peaceful protest impossible. He has said he will fast in detention and others in Durban will fast in his support.~~

The fasters

~~Richard~~ and national servicemen like Rifleman Dodson who are opposed to conscription are not cowards or unpatriotic. Their love for their country and its people lies at the heart of their stand.

They are prepared to serve South Africa in constructive ways that bring black and white people closer together, and our country closer to a just peace.

They should not be punished for this.

Laurie Nathan

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