

AN ACCOUNT OF THE ONGOING ACTIVITIES IN THE VAAL AND PARYS TOWNSHIPS

The political turmoil which engulfed the Vaal Townships early in September last year, heralded the escalating discontent among the black people in South Africa. It signified their rejection of racial law which served to entrench apartheid and further alienate them from the process of decision making in the country of their birth. This almost inevitable tragedy merely marked the turning point of turbulent events since the beginning of 1984. The year was eventful, characterised by a spate of violent political protests in most Townships.

In Pretoria for instance, the year will be remembered for school - boycotts, student deaths, and an unwarranted decision by the Dept. of Education and Training to close down several schools. The sporadic unrests which later ensued led to the fateful day, February 13, when Emma Sathège, a Form 1 student at D.H. Peta High School, was run down by a police Land Rover inside the school premises. In the O.F.S. an almost insignificant little township became the flash point of public attention as protests against rent hikes assumed a violent turn.

The Vaal Townships, in the wake of this spiralling violence, specially after the country wide protests against the "Tri-cameral parliamentary election", erupted into highly violent protests unknown to the country since 1976. Due to the intensity of the violence the situation gained much publicity on almost all international media. Another reason for this was, perhaps, the involvement of Sharpeville, a township which up till this day still gives the Pretoria government nightmares.

Residents' demands and grievances were articulated through their leaders such as Rev. Moselleane and Lord Mc Camel. The response of the authorities, however was negative - a spate of detentions, maimings and even killings followed.

Among the demands put forward by residents were the following:

- * The immediate resignation of all Community Councillors and
- * The reduction of rents to R30.00.

The proposed rent hikes were largely ignored, the rents being temporarily frozen pending the financial budget of the Administration Board.

Till now the government has done little to restore calm and peace to the situation. All it has done was to send a one-man commission of inquiry to investigate the causes of the Vaal unrest. Nothing has been done to address the burning problems! The more the government

delays necessary action, the more the possibility of yet another eruption looms. This time the eruption may be unmanageable and could engulf the whole country!!!

The Vaal townships will never be the same again! Residents are showing increasing signs of preparedness to continue with their struggle. Many now realise that the problems of rent and Community Councillors are manifestations of the apartheid policy. The stand taken by their protests, therefore, pose a direct challenge to the apartheid regime.

The report on the following meetings clearly illustrate this point.

ACTIVITIES IN THE VAALTOWNSHIPS

(a) Sebokeng:

Students have been boycotting classes since the outbreak of the Sept. 3rd unrests. Even when schools re-opened on Sept. 26th no students in this area were seen on school premises or wearing uniform. While it was reported that protests were simmering down, what was the cause of their stayaway? To understand this one needs to enquire from the students:

A series of meetings took place in Sebokeng, some dealing with academic issues while others dealt with the rent problems and yet others dealt with general political issues. In order to understand the reasons behind the current school boycotts one has to note the trend of students' meetings held at various churches in December. For this purpose we will single out two, viz., those held at the Roman Catholic Church(9/12/84) and at the Methodist Church(11/12/84). Convenors at the Roman Catholic Church meeting were COSAS (Congress of South African Students). They were greatly supported by the ministers' Solidarity Group. Proceedings traditionally commenced with the National Anthem and prayer by Father Lenkoe. The agenda covered the school boycotts and consequently the rent issue as well as dealings (whether or not there should be any) with the one-man "Commission of Inquiry".

The meeting unanimously spoke for the residents' demand to drop the rent to R30.00, the resignation of Community Councillors, and the release of all detainees. An elderly person's condemnation of the government's policies evoked tumultuous applause. The spirit of support for leaders Mandela, Goldberg, Sisulu and Kathrada was high. The large crowd which could not be accommodated in the small church added to the spirit by joining in with the singing.

The students used this occasion to reiterate their reasons for the continued school boycott. These were given as :

- * The continued detention of their fellow students and
- * Fear that police might intimidate their parents, whilst they are at school, into paying the rents.

This issue developed into an unpleasant controversy as I shall later show.

Mixed feelings were expressed at the idea of meeting with Prof. Tjaar van der Walt of the Commission of Inquiry. One person stated the idea of a commission of inquiry, stating that ^{commissions} were favourable toward those who conducted them. He cited the de Lange Commission report on education which has not forced the government to act seriously. He claimed that the present envisaged commission would not address the problems faced by the Vaal people but was a ploy by the government to defuse hostilities against South Africa from the international arena. The ball is now in the government's court!

The meeting was peaceful. Trouble started when the people dispersed. People became hysterical at the sight of a police van which passed the crowd. The crowd pelted it with stones. A policeman who attempted to scare away the crowd brought upon an uncontrollable situation. Timely intervention by the Ministers enabled the crowd to disperse once more.

(b) The Methodist Church Meeting:

This meeting was convened by AZASM (Azanian Students Movement) subsequent to the COSAS/Ministers meeting at the Roman Catholic Church. The decisions here diverge ironically from those of the earlier meeting. This meeting nearly collapsed due to pressure from the COSAS affiliates who adopted a boycott decision. The chairman, an AZASM member, introduced the agenda as : (i) a statement of Back to school from AZASM and (ii) A paper on Black Consciousness. The former was open to discussion and controversial. This controversy could colour the Vaal situation. The many speakers were from COSAS and slogan shouting nearly made the meeting uncontrollable. The chairman managed to restore order by asking those responsible for the disruption to leave the meeting. The meeting ended with AZASM's decision to return to school next year (1985).

(c) Sharpeville:

The school boycott at Sharpeville also merits attention because it fits in with the Sebokeng situation. Here students are divided

between COSAS and Sharpeville Students' National Resistance Movement. The latter's views co-incide with those of AZASM.

Two meetings were held at Sharpeville. The first was held on the same date as that at Sebokeng Roman Catholic Church (9/12/84). The agenda and resolutions were similar to those of the Sebokeng meeting. The only difference was that a delegation of ten, as requested by the Township clerk, Mr. Louw, was asked to meet with the Administration Bopard officials and present the demands of the residents.

At the second meeting, convened by Sharpeville Students' Resistance Movement, affiliates took the decision that students should go back to school. There is now a pronounced division amongst the Vaal students - Those for the idea of "Back to School" and those opposed to it.

One immediately foresees an element of conflict when schools re-open. Threats have already been issued against those who dare to go back to school next year. COSAS seem to be stronger in Sebokeng while Sharpeville Students' Resistance Movement appear to have a stronger foothold in Sharpeville. Many students, however, attend school at Sebokeng and one is left guessing at what will happen on the day when the schools re-open.

The overall situation in the Vaal is characterised by afternoon political meetings on dusty streets. Children have adopted a practice of gathering and chanting freedom songs. This has taken place due to the unusual absence of police in the townships but also primarily due to a growing radical awareness amongst the people on political matters.

On 22/12/84 meetings were convened at several churches in almost all Vaal townships. The purpose was to explain to the residents the call by the U.D.F. and Trade Unions to observe Christmas as a black one. It is possibly due to these meetings that the call was responded to as positively and overwhelmingly as it was.

Soon after these meetings a bottle store, which was being reconstructed and partly operative, was attacked by residents of Zone 12. Beer was taken and the bottle store set alight. On Christmas the focus of attention shifted to Sharpeville and Boipatong townships where residents from Boipatong started a march at dawn to assemble at the Sharpeville cemetery. The residents had earlier taken a decision at a Black Christmas meeting to avoid entertainment and to embark

on a clean up operation of the graves of all victims of the unrest since September 3rd. Thousands of people co-operated.

Trouble started after the operation when people were marching back home. On passing the Administration Board offices, the anger of the crowd broke loose. Stones were thrown and the building set alight. Bophelong township, too, did not escape the scene of such violence as violence of the same nature broke out there. In the process a youth was killed by a bullet fired from the police. Unfortunately, as in other cases, this situation was followed by detentions.

(d) Sasolburg:

Here the unrest appears, contrary to newspaper reports, to have been following the residents' awareness (since the September 3rd uprisings) and an undemoralised campaign to reduce the rents to R30.00. This may easily be confirmed by interviewing ordinary residents as I did. This explains the burning of shops which belong to the brother of the unpopular Vaal mayor, Essau Mahlatsi.

The situation has, however, been restored to normal and many people continue with their day to day activities.

(e) Parys:

Since the outbreak of violent protests against rent hikes earlier this year, residents of Tumahole appear to have been appeased by the decision of the local Administration Board, after the uprisings, to scrap the proposed rent increases. But here too COSAS has a strong influence among the students. This is manifested by activities such as cultural programmes organised under their auspices. The Civic Association still attempts to regroup itself after having been disorganised by the police detentions of its executive members.

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