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CONGRESS AND THE REMOVAL

February 9, 1955, will for many years remain vivid in the minds of the people of the Western Areas. It was on this day that the first batch of 100 families was forcibly removed from Sophiatown to Verwoerd's concentration camp - Meadowlands.

Today, it is important that we take stock of what happened between February 9, 1955 and February 9, 1956. We must record our successes lest they are distorted by our enemies, just as they have done with the history of South Africa. We must also take cognisance of our failures and shortcomings and use the experience gained to improve our methods of struggle against the Removal which, contrary to what some people think, is not a lost fight yet. It will take Dr Verwoerd and the Nationalist Government a number of years to remove us all from the Western Areas, and therefore, the removal is a struggle we can still fight and win.

WHAT WERE OUR GAINS?

For us to see our gains clearly, we must understand that the fight against the removal of the Western Areas is a political fight inextricably interwoven with the entire struggle against oppression and domination. It is for political reasons that the Government has decided to rob the Africans of their God-given right to own land in the country of their birth; to rob them of their properties and forcibly remove them from their dear homes. It is therefore natural that our gains or losses must be political. Any other approach to this issue will be unrealistic, emotional, sentimental or opportunistic.

The campaign against the removal of the Western Areas took various forms: organisational, educational and agitational. These methods served to build the A.N.C. into a powerful organisation. All rival organisations died out or existed only in name. Hundreds of people joined the Congress and became activists. Even thousands that did not join nevertheless accepted Congress as the organisation that expresses fully their desires and aspirations - their mouthpiece. That was the first gain.

The second victory of the A.N.C. was that the Campaign aroused sharply the indignation of the people against this diabolical measure. It increased their political consciousness to a high degree. For the first time in the history of Sophiatown, landlords and tenants came together not to discuss increased rents, quarrels over goodwills and closing water taps - quarrels which are as old as Sophiatown itself, but they had come as Africans, as oppressed people, to discuss the taking away of their inherent right to buy and own property in the urban area.

The third gain was the slogan "We shall not move" which mobilised the people into a solid core with the tenants taking a leading part under the banner of the A.N.C. "Asi hamb! - Are tsamal" became the household expression and salutation. Reactionaries too had to tow the line.

It was this determination of the people to reject Apartheid that shook the Government and made even the arrogant Dr Verwoerd to pause and think. Originally the Government wanted a mass removal of the people and to dump them in the open veld at Meadowlands like a herd of cattle. That had to be changed. The removal is now carried out piecemeal. First the people living in properties owned by the Resettlement Board have to be removed. Then, those who live in private owned houses. Later on the Government will try to expropriated the properties of those gallant fighters who are not prepared to sell the right of the African people to the Government. The Government was also forced to build houses at Meadowlands. This is not only the longest way of removing the Western Areas but it is undoubtedly the most expensive. And, make no mistake, the Government is very unhappy about it. The removal is now costing the Government more than they had expected to spend.

Yes, it was this determination of the people to defend their rights which made the Government to postpone the removal in 1954 with

the excuse the people will be removed only when 1000 houses shall have been built in Meadowlands. At the time there were over 300 houses ready for occupation but there were no people to occupy them.

OUR GREAT VICTORY. Before we record the great victory we have so far registered against the removal, let us briefly show some of the things the government was compelled to do which are a clear proof of the Government's fear of the people.

On December 28, 1954, while most of the people were either away or still enjoying their Christmas holidays, the Nationalist Government through its Resettlement Board served 150 families with notices to quit Sophiatown by the 12th February, 1955. To this the people gave one solid reply: "Are tsamai". The Government was all the more frightened. Through its agents, the Government tried to get the people to go to Meadowlands voluntarily as from the 7th February so as to break the morale of the people. But all attempts to bluff and trick the people failed dismally. After the lies of the Government information officers that the people were willing to go to Meadowlands and that only few agitators were trying to influence the people against the removal had been exposed, something had to be done by the Government to force the people out in order to save its face and that of its officials.

On February 8, Minister Swart declared a state of emergency. Meetings of all sorts were banned for 20 days in the Magisterial districts of Johannesburg and Roodepoort. The removal was ordered to take place on February 9 - remember this was not done by Dr Verwoerd, Minister of Native Affairs. He together with information officers, Prinsloo, Van Rooyen and others, his African propaganda staff, his agents and police and the Resettlement Board were far too small to deal with the removal. But it was Mr Swart, Minister of Justice!! - the man who few years ago told the police to shoot first and ask questions afterwards. He too did not feel safe after all, he had to ask Mr Erasmus and his Union Defence Force to stand by.

On the morning of February 9, Mr C.R. Swart sent to Sophiatown over 2000 police armed to the teeth with machine guns and other dangerous weapons that could be used to mow down the people of this area. About three o'clock when Sophiatown was all quiet and peacefully asleep with the exception of Congress volunteers, the forces of destruction began to arrive. Military trucks one after another off-loaded young trigger-happy-looking Afrikaners coming from various parts of the Transvaal. By five o'clock, the entire Western Areas was surrounded by fully armed and hostile police. At six o'clock the police with rifles in their hands moved in, in a military fashion to the houses where some of the people had to be removed and by sunset 100 families were removed to Meadowlands at the point of the gun. What happened to the other 50 families that had to be removed?

OUR COURAGEOUS VOLUNTEERS WORKED THE WHOLE NIGHT.

On the eve of the removal February 8, our courageous and gallant fighters for Freedom - the Congress volunteers worked the whole night in pouring rain, removing the belongings of those persons who were prepared to stay in shanties than to be removed to Meadowlands. By two in the morning of the 9th February, these indefatigable sons of Afrika had managed to remove 40 families to the Anglican School. 10 families had left for Alexandra Township and other places. At about six in the afternoon of the same day, five volunteers were arrested and charged under the Riotous Assemblies Act, a charge which was later withdrawn because it was frivolous.

During the second removal 42 volunteers were arrested. These fearless young Africans were on duty removing the people from the Resettlement Board houses. At the time of their arrest they had removed only two families. Few were discharged. Some were charged under the pass laws and others for not giving their tax receipts. To of our volunteers who have done this wonderful work we have no words, to thank them for their real reward will be the freedom of our people.

This we boldly say the people should record as their great victory yet scored over the removal. It is a great victory because the Government had to use force of arms and over 2000 police with the

280
military standing by to remove our people to Meadowlands. This the Government did knowing full well that the people of the Western Areas were unarmed. Congress which is the vanguard of the liberatory movement in this country and the organisation that led the resistance against the removal of the Western Areas is following a policy of non-violence. The fear of the Government had about Sophiatown was not that of arms. The Government became desperate because the people had discovered the removal to be a naked robbery of their right and properties. It is the fear of this truth that made the Government to hide behind machine guns.

We salute the people of the Western Areas for their excellent and unsurpassed behaviour. They refused to be provoked into violence. A throwing of one small stone at the police would have made Sophiatown a blood bath and many innocent lives would have been lost and the struggle against the removal lost on that day. But because of the people's undivided loyalty to Congress policy of non-violence, not only did we make the Government look foolish in the eyes of the world but their fascist methods were thoroughly exposed.

Despite the show of force by the Nationalist Government, there were still hundreds of tenants to this day who refuse to go to Meadowlands and many landlords who are not prepared to sell their properties. These are the thousands who have been inspired by Congress correct leadership. We shall be failing in our duty if we do not salute those to fighters Mr Molepo, Executive Committee members of the Sophiatown Branch of the A.N.C. and Mr Makoro Masinga, member of the Branch. These two men defeated the Resettlement Board with its police. Finally the magistrate had to order the removal. To them we say Afrika! You have played your part.

WHERE DID WE FAIL?

It is common knowledge that only those who stand up and do something can make mistakes. Hence we too have made mistakes in this campaign. The first mistake we made was that of not following up our people who were removed to Meadowlands. In other words once these people were removed we neglected them, regarded them as cowards who have betrayed our cause when in fact they are comrades-in-arms who have fought to the best of their ability and because they are still alive can still fight.

Our second mistake is one that had characterised most of our campaigns, namely, that of expecting victory from the very beginning, and hence when in the initial stages retreats and partial losses are encountered to give up the whole struggle. It is thus as a result of this mistaken attitude that most of us thought that because some people have been removed and our volunteers arrested, we have been defeated and gave up the struggle against the removal.

The third was to allow our enemy to choose the date for us. We focussed the attention of the people to February 12, a date chosen by the Government instead of choosing our own date on the basis our programme and state of preparedness. And, the fourth, and a grave one at that, was that at a time when the spirit of the people was very high and when the people depended solely on Congress to give a directive as to what had to be done on the day of the removal, we delay to tell the people precisely what they must do. As a result when meetings were banned and the date of the removal came earlier we could not meet the people, hence there was confusion and disillusionment.

These are genuine mistakes committed during the first stages of the removal, and it is the task of each and every one of us to see that such mistakes and many others do not occur.

To the people of Sophiatown we say, the fight is not lost. For the aim of the Government is not only to remove a few families to Meadowlands but rather to remove the whole of the Western Areas and thus deprive the African people of their freehold rights. That is the real aim of the Government and therefore it should be our task to defeat this fascist measure.

WHAT OUR NEXT ISSUE.

- (1) Why did Congress not fight on the day of the Removal?
- (2) How the people live in Meadowlands?

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