

SAHA IN THE CLASSROOM

COVERT REPRESSION IN THE 1980s

A set of classroom materials
produced by the South African History Archive
for Grade 12 learners

SOURCE BOOKLET FOR LEARNERS



THE SAHA IN THE CLASSROOM SERIES

This series of booklets comprises an introductory booklet on how to use the SAHA in the Classroom series and 9 source booklets for learners, with corresponding guide booklets for educators, exploring the following aspects of South Africa's history from 1976 - 1994:

The 1983 Constitution

The United Democratic Front (UDF) and the National Forum

Formal repression in the 1980s

Covert repression in the 1980s

Resistance in the 1980s - civil society

Resistance in the 1980s - militancy

Resistance in the 1980s - international pressure

The move to democracy - negotiations

The move to democracy - the role of violence

The South African History Archive (SAHA) is an independent human rights archive committed to recapturing lost and neglected histories, documenting past struggles against apartheid, as well as ongoing struggles in the making of democracy in South Africa. SAHA's central mission is to bring South African history out of the archives and into schools, universities and communities in new and innovative ways. SAHA is also dedicated to using South Africa's Promotion of Access to Information Act in order to extend the boundaries of freedom of information in South Africa and to build up an archive of materials released under the Act for public use.

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INTRODUCTION

These historical sources and questions are produced by the South African History Archive (SAHA) for Grade 12 History learners. They form part of a broader historical study of South Africa in the 1980s.

This booklet examines the covert repression of political resistance by the apartheid state during the 1980s. State repression took many forms but generally repressive measures were brutal and denied people basic and fundamental human rights. Covert repression was hidden, and operated underground. In this way, the public was generally not aware of what was going on.

In the national examination, you will be asked questions on a wide variety of different sources. These will include written, oral, visual and other material useful to the historian.

There will be questions on both **primary sources** and **secondary sources**:

- **primary sources** are sources that come from the period that is being studied
- **secondary sources** are sources that are produced after the period of history that is being studied

Before getting to the sources, you will be given the historical context of covert repression of political resistance to the apartheid state during the 1980s. This text is much like a secondary source, as the information comes from the books written by historians who have researched this period. The sources themselves are drawn from the archives of SAHA, and will, more often than not, be primary sources.

These learning materials are intended to:

- provide you with an opportunity to use source material to **help your understanding** of South Africa in the 1980s
- provide you with **practice** in answering source-based questions
- guide you on **how to approach answers**

Some tips:

- Always look at the mark allocation to guide you.
- In this material, two marks are given for each point that can be explained and backed up with evidence from the source.
- A two-mark question will usually award one mark for identifying evidence from the source, and one mark for your explanation.
- When you answer a question for six marks, you need to explain at least three points and provide evidence from the source to back up each point.

After the sources and questions you will find a glossary of difficult terms and a list of books for further reading.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

COVERT OR 'INFORMAL REPRESSION' IN THE 1980S

After the Soweto Uprising of 1976, the South African government was not able to stem the growing tide of resistance. By the 1980s, the anger and militancy of the youth had transformed into mass political organisation. The government responded with its two-pronged approach of reform and repression. Despite a number of reform measures, such as the Constitution of 1983, the main form of government response was repression. State repression took many forms but generally repressive measures were brutal and denied people basic and fundamental human rights.

It is possible to categorise repression into formal repression (as discussed in Section 3) and covert (hidden) repression. Formal repression related to specific laws that were passed by the apartheid state, and people were conscious of this kind of overt repression. Covert repression was hidden, and operated underground. In this way, the public was generally not aware of what was going on. This section deals with covert repression.

COVERT MEASURES OF REPRESSION

There was an extensive network of covert operations that formed the core of a hidden form of repression by the apartheid government. The people involved in these operations did not need acts of parliament or laws or regulations to carry out their activities. PW Botha created the State Security Council (SSC), which operated over and above the parliamentary cabinet. It consisted of army and police chiefs, and was an intelligence centre that made crucial but hidden decisions on state security. It was supported by a network of about 500 regional, district and local Joint Management Centres known as JMCs, forming a complete network covering the country and with information on every area, township and village. It had a secret budget and was not accountable to the public at all.

HIT SQUADS

Hit squad structures existed within the South African Police and within the South African Defence Force (SADF). One such structure was the Civil Cooperation Bureau (CCB) which carried out assassinations on targeted people. This included David Webster, an anthropology lecturer at Wits University.

As a result of the activities of hit squads, many individuals were abducted and disappeared. People were harassed and their homes or cars were petrol bombed. Others received death threats and some were indeed assassinated. During the 1980s, about ten political assassinations occurred every year. In 1990 the Human Rights Commission recorded 28 assassinations, and in 1991 there were 60. By 1992, this had peaked at 97. Organisations were also targeted. Their buildings and offices were burgled and damaged. There were deliberate smear campaigns against organisations and individuals.

DESTABILISATION

The government tried to prevent neighbouring countries from supporting the liberation movements through a policy of destabilisation. SADF regularly launched cross-border raids on suspected ANC bases in neighbouring countries such as Zimbabwe, Zambia, Lesotho and Botswana. It also supported guerrilla groups in Mozambique (RENAMO) and Angola (UNITA) through Namibia, in an attempt to bring down the existing socialist governments in those countries.

In a Commonwealth report of 1989 entitled 'Apartheid Terrorism', it was estimated that in Southern Africa, the human cost was 1½ million dead through military and economic action, most of them children, while a further four million people had been displaced from their homes by the actions of the South African apartheid government.

Amongst the destabilisation methods resorted to by the apartheid state were the following:

- armed action, ranging from sporadic commando raids into neighbouring countries, to full-scale invasion and occupation as in Angola
- hit squad raids to abduct or assassinate political opponents
- encouragement or even the creation of surrogate anti-government forces through logistical support, intelligence and training as in Mozambique and Angola
- political pressures to promote the installation of governments well-disposed towards apartheid South Africa, as in Malawi, Swaziland and Lesotho
- continued presence in Namibia in defiance of the United Nations' cancellation of South Africa's right (mandate) to administer 'South West Africa'
- economic pressures to create and maintain a dependency on the South African transport, harbour, customs and financial systems

VIGILANTISM

Vigilante groups first appeared in South Africa around 1985 and had their origins in the support systems which were built up around the unpopular apartheid-created structures of homeland authorities and black local authorities. Vigilante groups were often recruited from conservative 'traditional' elements of society, or from the ranks of desperate, unemployed and even criminal individuals. Having a vested interest in the apartheid-created or -endorsed structures that they were called upon or paid to protect, they would intervene, often with extreme violence, in situations where anti-apartheid activists threatened those structures. An example of this was when activists called for homeland authorities to resign. Vigilantism was actively encouraged by the state through thinly disguised support by the security forces, but also by covert support and motivation through funding and training.

The Harms inquiry, hamstrung from the start, moves to a frustrating end

The toothless watchdog

Sunday Star 11/6/90

To page 2

Sarah Sussens
MISSING witnesses ... missing documents ... missing investigation ... and missing teeth ...

These are some of the criticisms being levelled at the Harms Commission of Inquiry which, after three months of hearings, appears no closer to unravelling the murderous and shadowy goings-on of the Civil Co-Operation Bureau (CCB) hit-squad saga.

Two main areas of criticism are that:

- The terms of reference of the commission are far too narrow, preventing many important questions from being asked and answered, and preventing the commission from investigating some of the most controversial and sinister aspects of the scandal.
- The attitude of CCB officers and agents who have hidden documents and refused to answer questions despite assurances from President de Klerk and Defence Minister Magnus Malan that there would be no cover-up.

The commission itself has also been criticised for not subpoenaing General Malan, the one man who can order his officers to tell the full truth and produce missing documents, although Mr Justice Louis Harms has stated in commission hearings that he has seen General Malan in his office and the issue has been discussed at length. General Malan has subsequently issued instructions for his men to seize the documents.

There have been calls for General Malan to take responsibility for the CCB saga as head of the Defence Department, and Democratic Party MP Colin Eglin has said the public mind would remain "uneasy" until General Malan appeared before the commission.

The main problem is the specific terms of reference that govern the Harms Commission and the Commissions Act itself.

A judge without the powers of a judge

Although the commission is chaired by a judge, he does not have the powers a judge would have in a criminal trial.

This means he cannot provide indemnity to any witnesses, and several CCB members have simply refused to answer vital questions on the grounds that their answers might incriminate them.

These include key witnesses, among them spy-master Major-General Eddie Webb, who disclosed that the CCB had been involved in 150 to 160 projects worldwide, yet refused to answer certain questions on the basis of self-incrimination.

Another is CCB agent Willie van Deventer, who told an Afrikaans newspaper he had information on the killing of Mamelodi doctor Fabian Ribeiro and his wife Florence, and then refused to give further information to the commission "for fear of self-incrimination", thus dashing the hopes of the couple's children of getting to the bottom of their parents' murder.

SA Defence Force generals and former CCB operatives have claimed privilege on certain incidents as well. In none of these cases has the commission been able to force an answer, threaten a witness with jail or offer indemnity to get at the truth.

However, according to sources close to the commission, in most of the instances where privilege has been claimed there has been independent evidence available to the commission.

But they pointed out that there was a way around the problem of witnesses claiming privilege. An amendment to the Commissions Act, similar to one in the Insolvency Act, might be considered.

This forced witnesses to answer incriminating questions subject to the proviso that the evidence was led in camera and it was not used against them in subsequent criminal trials.

Another "structural" problem in the commission is the fact that its terms of reference cover only acts of violence with political motives in South Africa. This has meant that only a small portion of alleged hit-squad activities has come under the spotlight.

It means, for instance, that the commission cannot investigate the murder of Namibian advocate Anton Lubowski, despite there being strong suspicions that CCB operatives are linked to his death.

It has also created a situation where the public learns, tantalisingly, of certain missions but no details are given.

The public, for example, may never know who the six people were whom Petrus Botes of the CCB gave orders to eliminate, or how or why the CCB spent R28 million, as these relate to external projects.

The second point of criticism raises one of the most puzzling aspects surrounding the commission.

Why have the CCB members been allowed to get away with an alleged "activation of an emergency plan" to get rid of vital files relevant to the commission?

CCB managing director Joe Verster admitted to the commission that internal project files disappeared as there were fears for the safety of CCB operatives and their families.

Emergency plan, then the files vanished

He said he had put into effect an emergency plan for files to be moved to a safe place. The files had since vanished.

Counsel for the Webster Trust, Eberhard Berleismann, SC, put it to Mr Verster that by hiding the files the CCB had disobeyed a lawful command to produce them. Verster replied that he did not see it that way. Their own safety was above the order, he said.

He also told the commission ANC "terrorists" were entering the country and the CCB was now the victim. Because of this, the CCB would "look after itself".

The question that begs an answer is why did it so difficult to seize these files and why did the commission not take steps to force CCB men to hand them over?

According to sources close to the commission, witnesses giving evidence before a commission are immune from prosecution until such time as hearings cease. When Mr Justice Harms submits his report to the State

President, a decision may be taken to charge CCB men with obstructing justice.

Why, when General Malan ordered an internal investigation before the commission was called, did his men not seize the files? According to evidence before the commission, the CCB was not asked for the files.

These files relate directly to the area of investigation of the Harms Commission.

Both President de Klerk and General Malan have promised to get to the bottom of the hit-squad saga, yet CCB men, who fall under the Department of Defence are, in effect, refusing to give full and frank evidence.

Disappointed families of alleged victims are publicly calling the body toothless, charging that its powers to "surgically remove" the problem have been blunted.

They are asking why important figures in the CCB are allowed to appear in ludicrous disguises yet the names and personal details of victims are available to all.

On the first day of hearings, Tim McNally, the Free State Attorney-General assisting the commission, submitted a list of 71 political murders on behalf of Lawyers for Human Rights. So far mention has been made of just three.

QUESTIONS FOR SOURCE A

A1.

Name two criticisms levelled at the Harms Commission. (4)

A2.

Explain the meaning of the headline 'The toothless watchdog'.
Evaluate how accurate this description is of the Harms Commission. (8)

A3.

Why did the narrow terms of reference mean that the
CCB could not be investigated properly? (6)

A4.

Why was General Malan the key to a full investigation of the CCB? (4)

A5.

What questions did the Commission raise that were not answered? (4)

A6.

Do you think there was a successful cover-up of the activities of the CCB? Explain your answer. (6)

(TOTAL MARKS: 32)

SOURCE B: Zapiro Cartoon – Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) Hearings (1996)



A political cartoon by Zapiro.
(Archived at SAHA as Collection AL3129: B15, Zapiro TRC Cartoon Collection)

QUESTIONS FOR SOURCE B

B1.

What organisations do these three 'crocodiles' represent? (3)

B2.

What is the significance of their appearance at the TRC Amnesty Application Hearings? (4)

B3.

Why do you think the cartoonist drew the representatives of these organisations as crocodiles? (6)

B4.

What point is the cartoonist making? (4)

B5.

Do you think this source is biased? Substantiate your answer. (8)

B6.

What other sources back up or contradict this cartoon? (2)

(TOTAL MARKS: 27)

SOURCE C: Extract from Eugene de Kock's testimony at the TRC Amnesty Hearings (1999)

MR HATTINGH

27

EA DE KOCK

MR DE KOCK: That came from Gen Van Rensburg who was then the Head of the Vlakplaas Unit, or at least of C Section.

MR HATTINGH: Were other Officers involved in this order?

MR DE KOCK: Yes, Gen Engelbrecht was involved.

MR HATTINGH: We will later return to this, but I would just *chama* like to mention it at this stage, when you received this order, was the Harms Commission busy with its enquiry?

MR DE KOCK: Yes.

MR HATTINGH: And while the Harms Commission was investigating alleged crimes by Vlakplaas, you received an order from your Commander to be involved in more such crimes?

MR DE KOCK: Yes, that is correct.

MR HATTINGH: The operation was executed, people were shot dead and a report was compiled about that?

MR DE KOCK: Yes Chairperson.

MR HATTINGH: Before 1990 you were also involved along with the CCB in an attack on an ANC transit house in Botswana?

MR DE KOCK: That is correct.

MR HATTINGH: And the order came from who or the request came from who?

MR DE KOCK: ... (tape ends) ... obtained information regarding a transit or halfway house on the Botswana side and after the processing and observation of this information, a report was submitted to Brigadier Schoon and Brigadier Loots and we

PRETORIA HEARINGS

AMNESTY/GAUTENG

obtained permission to eliminate this transit house. I would just like to mention that the BSB members accompanied us in the regard that Botswana was allocated to the Military as an operational area as Swaziland was allocated to the Police. I don't want to involve them unnecessarily, it didn't come from them.

MR HATTINGH: During December 1985 Vlakplaas was involved in an attack on so-called activists in Lesotho, is that correct?

MR DE KOCK: That is correct Chairperson.

MR HATTINGH: On whose order?

MR DE KOCK: This came from old President P.W. Botha.

MR HATTINGH: Who told you this?

MR DE KOCK: This came from Brigadier Schoon. Amongst others, I had to draw up a report if we had the capacity to do this, and the information which we had surrounding this and Brigadier Schoon brought it to me and handed it over to Gen Van der Merwe, who were on their way to a Security Council Meeting and approximately two or three hours later, I received the documents back and it was approved and I was told to go ahead.

MR HATTINGH: Was there any urgency attached to this action?

MR DE KOCK: Yes Chairperson. There was much tension at that stage between Lesotho and South Africa in Lesotho, because members of the ANC were accommodated there and were allowed to use it as a base. And this had regard with the increase of attacks in the Western Cape, from there.

Eugene de Kock, a former commander of Vlakplaas, appeared before the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Amnesty Hearings on 25 May 1999.

(Archived at SAHA as Collection AL3121: A33.4, Julian Knight and Rudolph Jansen Collection)

QUESTIONS FOR SOURCE C

C1.

What does this source tell us about CCB activities in 1990? (4)

C2.

From the source, identify two kinds of covert operations that the apartheid government was involved in. Give two examples. (6)

C3.

Compare Sources A and C. Does Source C provide evidence in support of the contention that the Harms Commission was a 'toothless watchdog'? (6)

C4.

What does this source tell us about the chain of command for covert repression? (4)

C5.

Who gave the orders for the CCB to attack so-called activists in Lesotho?
Why is this statement significant? (6)

C6.

Is this a reliable source? Substantiate your answer. (6)

(TOTAL MARKS: 40)

SOURCE D: Extract from the submission to the TRC by General JV van der Merwe (21 October 1996)

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ANNEXURE TO CHARGE SHEET
VOLUME 1 - Annexure P

27

They were merely to be handed over to the group and any further action by utilizing the grenades was to be left to the group themselves. A number of handgrenades and a limpet mine were later channelled to the group of activists through a certain person who had contact with them.

It later transpired that a number of these activists were killed and injured when they launched a series of armed attacks against the homes of policemen resident in the area. Another activist was also killed when attempting to sabotage an electrical sub- (10) station by using a limpet mine.

22.

During 1988 I received an instruction from Mr Adriaan VLOK, then Minister of Law and Order, to the effect that the building known as Khotso-House was to be damaged by explosives to such an extent that it could no longer be utilized.

According to Mr VLOK this instruction had come from President P W BOTHA personally. It was common knowledge within security circles at the time that the building concerned served as a sort of "internal headquarters" of the ANC where resistance campaigns, (20) unrest and violence were planned and where financial and other assistance was provided to MK-members who had infiltrated into the country. According to information explosives were also stored in the basement of the building.

Despite/...

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Despite being in possession of a great deal of information regarding certain unlawful activities taking place within Khotso-House, the police were powerless in putting a stop to it as no informer or agent was prepared to give evidence in court regarding such activity. Minister VLOK was emphatic in stating that the maximum effort must be made to ensure that no lives were put at risk when carrying out the operation.

I duly delegated the instruction to Brigadier Willem SCHOON who at that stage commanded the Vlakplaas Unit and once again (10) emphasised the question of not putting lives at risk. The instruction was duly carried out at a later date and the building was so badly damaged that it was rendered non-usable.

23.

I am fully aware of the fact that the actions of various members of the Security Branch and other members of the South African Police, as defined in certain incidents which may be placed before this Committee, as well as that of the Human Rights Violation Committee, may in present circumstances where proper knowledge and awareness of the background to the violence and (20) mayhem as well as the emotions involved, is gradually fading, appear to be cold-blooded and murderous of nature.

I am also equally aware of the fact that there are many members of MK and APLA who were directly involved in the conflict who are

currently/...

Van der Merwe was a member of the State Security Council.
(Archived at SAHA as Collection AL3060:1, volume 3, PW Botha vs. the State)

QUESTIONS FOR SOURCE D

D1.

Who was General van der Merwe? (2)

D2.

What does this source reveal about the 'chain of command' for these types of covert operations?
(4)

D3.

Why was so much emphasis placed on not putting lives at risk when it was clear that many political assassinations and murders had already taken place? (4)

D4.

Does van der Merwe produce any undeniable evidence that unlawful activities were taking place at Khotso House? (4)

D5.

Is van der Merwe's evidence reliable? How would you substantiate it? (6)

D6.

Was General van der Merwe simply following orders and as such not responsible for the bombing that took place? (6)

(TOTAL MARKS: 24)

SOURCE E: Cartoon by Zapiro (1996)



This cartoon appeared in *The Sowetan* on 23 October 1996.
(Archived at SAHA as Collection AL3129: B28)

QUESTIONS FOR SOURCE E

E1.

Who are the three figures hanging from the chain? (3)

E2.

What is the 'chain of command' that Zapiro refers to? How does Zapiro illustrate this? (6)

E3.

What is the significance of the old South African flag? (2)

E4.

What is the viewpoint of the cartoonist? (6)

E5.

Do you think all those responsible for covert repression in South Africa are known? (8)

(TOTAL MARKS: 25)

SOURCE F: Testimony of Eugene de Kock

MR HATTINGH

33

EA DE KOCK

supply them with additional manpower and to support them in their capacities for the counter insurgency operations.

MR HATTINGH: Vlakplaas was not in one location, you were not attached just to one location?

MR DE KOCK: No Chairperson, we worked right throughout the whole country.

MR HATTINGH: Was Vlakplaas also requested to investigate or to cover up other crime related offences by other Security Branches?

MR DE KOCK: Yes Chairperson.

MR HATTINGH: And did you assist in this?

MR DE KOCK: Yes, we did Chairperson.

MR HATTINGH: Why was it necessary Mr De Kock?

MR DE KOCK: Chairperson, as regards with the maintenance of the covert actions and secrecy within the Security Police and there was no limitation as to what would be done to protect that secrecy.

MR HATTINGH: Vlakplaas then had to help other Security Branches when they were in trouble and when they were guilty of other offences which would come to light?

MR DE KOCK: That is correct Chairperson.

MR HATTINGH: Who approached you for assistance in this regard?

PRETORIA HEARINGS

AMNESTY/GAUTENG

I cannot say that there were other Generals who knew about it, I would simply accept that they did know about it.

MR HATTINGH: Then under paragraph 2.2.23.2 you deal with the establishment of weapon stock pile locations, were there any other similar occasions or incidents?

MR DE KOCK: Yes Chairperson, I refer you to the attack on Botswana, Zambia and Mozambique as well as Zimbabwe where weapon stock pile locations were established. Then we also had the case that before that attack, the Defence Force launched an attack in Botswana and attacked the wrong facility and because there were no weapons or ammunitions to be found among the equipment or property of the people over there, that was brought back, I was then requested to provide Makarov pistols. I then provided two and these pistols were then planted in this property which was returned in order to create the impression that there were members of the ANC who were indeed attacked there.

MR HATTINGH: You have referred to the Technical Services staff of the South African Police, did you have free access to their services and did you make use of their services?

MR DE KOCK: Yes.

MR HATTINGH: For which purposes did you make use of their services?

MR DE KOCK: It would have been for the construction of equipment - among others silencers that would then be the

Two extracts from Eugene de Kock's testimony at the TRC Amnesty Hearings, pages 33 and 52.
(Archived at SAHA as Collection AL3121: A33.4, The Julian Knight and Rudolph Jansen Collection)

QUESTIONS FOR SOURCE F

F1.

What role did the CCB and Vlakplaas play and where was their area of operation? (4)

F2.

How did Vlakplaas cover up the attack on the wrong house in Botswana? (4)

F3.

How does this source demonstrate that the South African security forces destabilised neighbouring countries such as Zambia, Mozambique, Botswana and Zimbabwe? (6)

F4.

Explain how the apartheid government violated international law and what effect this would have had on neighbouring countries and the ANC. (4)

F5.

How does this source help explain the nature of the 'total onslaught' policy of PW Botha? (6)

(TOTAL MARKS: 24)

SOURCE G: Judgement – State vs. Botha

C47.2407
GSH 15/98

- 1557 -
- 938 -

JUDGMENT

Johan van der Merwe - former Commissioner of Police
- and Mr Adriaan Vlok - former Minister of Law and
Order - alleged that the order to blow up Khotso
House in Johannesburg came directly from the ac-
cused. According to Mr Eugene de Kock he was
congratulated by Mr Vlok for the Khotso House
bombing and he believed that the orders to blow up
Cosatu House, came from the accused;

- (d) In the State Security Council minutes ambiguous
terminology is used, such as **eliminate/elimineer**, (10)
neutralise/neutraliseer and **take out/uithaal**.
According to Mr Eugene de Kock these terms meant to
kill. It appears to be necessary to obtain clarity
from the accused as the chairperson of the State
Security Council, as to the precise meaning of these
terms, especially if reference is made to the defi-
nition of **gross violation of human rights** in section
1 of the Act, which includes any attempt, conspira-
cy, incitement, instigation, command or procurement
to commit the killing, abduction, torture or severe (20)
ill-treatment of any person;
- (e) In view of positions held by the accused, namely
Minister of Defence, Prime Minister, State President
and Chairman of the State Security Council, he ap-
pears to be the one person who would be able to as-
sist the Commission to determine whether the former
government or its functionaries created a climate in
which gross violations of human rights could occur
or condoned or sanctioned gross human rights viola-
tions. (30)

F/...

This is page 1557 of the judgement in the State vs. Botha, Extract 17.

(Archived at SAHA as Collection AL3060: volume 17, 1557)

QUESTIONS FOR SOURCE G

G1.

Who incriminated PW Botha in the Khotso House bombings? (3)

G2.

Which three words in the State Security Council minutes have ambiguous meaning?
Why is clarity important in this context? (6)

G3.

Why could only PW Botha explain exactly what was meant by these words? (4)

G4.

What is the Act's definition of 'gross violation of human rights'? (4)

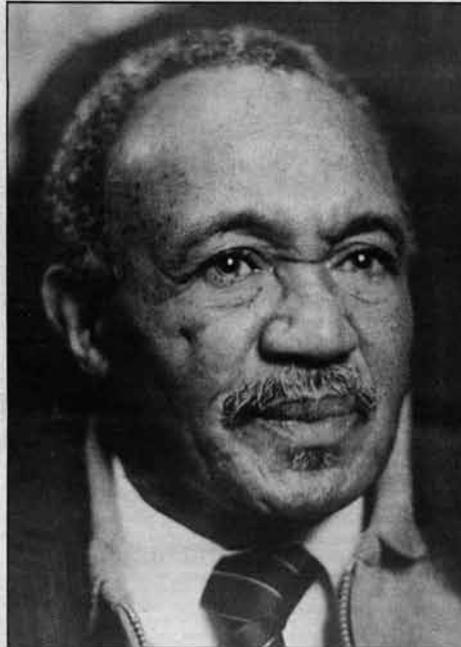
G5.

'The former government created an environment in which gross human rights violations could occur.' Do you agree with this statement? Using your own knowledge and the sources presented here, write a paragraph explaining your argument. (10)

(TOTAL MARKS: 27)

SOURCE H: Article – Vigilantes Aim for Community Leaders (April 1987)

1912-1987 75 years of the African National Congress



Picture by Stefano Cagnoni/Report

Archie Gumele, co-president of the United Democratic Front, visited Britain for the first time in February together with the UDF's former Transvaal regional vice-president Revd Frank Chikane. They told foreign office minister Linda Chalker that they were 'appalled' at the British government's veto of selective mandatory sanctions measures in the UN Security Council.

Archie Gumele addressed the AAM national committee and the local authority anti-apartheid conference in Glasgow during a packed programme in Britain. He said that the level of resentment inside South Africa was rising all the time. Despite the draconian conditions of the state of emergency, the morale of the democratic movement remained 'first class', with nobody panicking or allowing themselves to get depressed.

Pledge of fair reporting from new weekly paper

NEWS ON SUNDAY, the new weekly tabloid due to be launched on 26 April, has pledged that it will report 'truthfully and fairly' on the activities of the Anti-Apartheid Movement and the sanctions campaign.

The paper's editorial charter commits it to supporting 'people fighting to free their country from foreign occupation, from racist regimes, or from any form of dictatorship'.

This means, says *News on Sunday*, that it will 'vigorously oppose' the Pretoria regime, give full support to the struggles of people living under apartheid, and publish 'hard hitting, investigative stories that expose the political and financial interests behind apartheid'.

In the weeks leading up to its launch, *News on Sunday* is organising a promotional tour of music events at the Albert Hall in London, Manchester Free Trade Hall and elsewhere. All the profits are to be donated to the AAM.

News on Sunday became fully capitalised as a public limited company last August after successfully raising a modest £6.5 million from the trade union movement, local authorities and private sources. It hopes to raise further investment by launching a second share issue under the Business Expansion Scheme.

It believes that there is a gap in the Sunday newspaper market for up to 1.5 million sales of a left-wing but colourful and popular tabloid.

It is hoping to contact many of its

future readers directly through the labour movement and progressive groups such as AAM and CND, so saving money on advertising.

The radical character of the paper is enshrined in its editorial charter and it is protected from future Murdoch and Maxwell-type takeover attempts by a founders' trust which can veto any individual or body owning more than 15% of the shares.

News on Sunday will start with Scottish and Welsh editions and plans soon to include up to 12 regional and national supplements in the main paper.

Silenced

NOT satisfied with its emergency press curbs, the South African regime has now effectively banned all future editions of the anti-apartheid newspaper *Saspu National*.

The ban prohibits distribution of the newspaper unless it has been approved by the government censors - highly unlikely in view of its consistent support for the non-racial democratic movement.

Saspu National, whose lawyers are now fighting the ban, is well used to harassment and intimidation. In June last year its offices in South Africa were destroyed in an arson attack and some of its staff are still detained under the emergency regulations.

VIGILANTES AIM FOR COMMUNITY LEADERS

A NEW WAVE of vigilante terror has been launched by the regime in South Africa's townships since December, in a bid to crush the grassroots organisation of the democratic movement and to spread division and conflict among the people.

Residents have been murdered and kidnapped, homes smashed and property destroyed by gangs of thugs, sometimes in uniform, sometimes not, but always working in blatant collaboration with the 'security forces'.

A memorandum from the United Democratic Front, a copy of which has reached *AA News*, traces the origins of the vigilante onslaught to the regime's failure to crush resistance through its more conventional weapons of the police and army, detention and torture, and a wide range of draconian restrictions.

Six months into the national state of emergency, the memorandum notes, the challenge to apartheid from the democratic movement continued to be waged on a national level.

dilemma

P. W. Botha was in a dilemma. On 12 December, he had to appear on television to explain why drastic new curbs were now being introduced despite his government's repeated claims that the state of emergency had succeeded in reducing opposition to 'isolated' or 'sporadic' incidents.

The regime's new offensive, launched to coincide with the start of the UDF's Christmas Against the Emergency Campaign, comprised:

- even more extensive restrictions on the press and other media
- a major crackdown on the leaders of the UDF and other progressive organisations, preceded by the spreading of false rumours that the state of emergency was to be lifted on 12 December to tempt them to emerge from hiding
- the use of vigilantes to attack the lives and property of anti-apartheid activists

Up until 12 December, the memorandum notes, the attacks by vigilantes which had been such a prominent feature of the previous state of emergency were noticeably absent.

But since this date, behind the cordon of media censorship, numerous vigilante attacks have been launched in scattered parts of the country in what appears to be a carefully planned and coordinated way.

Guilty verdict from legal team

A LAWYERS' delegation to South Africa, including the chair of SATIS (Southern Africa - The Imprisoned Society), has described the regime's tightening grip as it prepares for its whites-only elections.

On 16 March Geoffrey Bindman, together with three other leading lawyers, gave an international press conference in Geneva to report on a three-week fact-finding visit to South Africa.

The delegation from the International Commission of Jurists is to report in detail on the increasing repression under apartheid.

Their report is based on extensive interviews and recordings with detainees, children, political groups, trade unionists, lawyers and community workers in South Africa.

'The South African government is stepping up its efforts to suppress opposition,' Geoffrey Bindman said.

'It is increasing controls on freedom of expression to conceal the war

Large gangs of well-armed vigilantes (up to 1,500 in one instance) have launched attacks while the security forces have either blatantly refused to intervene or actively assisted.

In many cases township residents captured by vigilantes have then found themselves arrested en masse by the police.

The vigilantes have focused their attacks on members of the street committees which have sprung up all over South Africa as the basic grassroots units of the democratic movement.

In their place, the regime is attempting, through the vigilantes, to set up its own parallel structures at street level through which to gather information and launch attacks.

The creation of these collaborationist structures coincides with the formation of the military-dominated Joint Management Centres which are in turn coordinated by the State Security Council.

'instant cops'

In September last year, the regime announced that thousands of 'kits konstabels' 'instant cops' were to be trained in three weeks to reinforce the existing police.

The news gave rise to fears, which have since been fully confirmed by events, that the 'instant cops' would simply be vigilantes in uniform.

Not only have the kits konstabels worked in vigilante style, many of them have been identified as belonging to vigilante gangs. Their stated aim is the same: to 'root out the comrades'.

There is widespread speculation that both forces, uniformed and non-uniformed, are trained by the same masters at a special secret camp in the Transvaal known as Askari.

The regime has attempted to project the recent vigilante attacks as spontaneous action by 'ordinary residents' or 'older people fed up with the intimidation by the youth'.

in the townships against the UDF and other groups, of which the children and youth are the most obvious targets.

'At the same time there is also an attempt to present a very different face to the western world through an elaborate pretence that the "situation is under control".'

'They have to pretend that the legal system is operating independently; pretend apartheid law is being dismantled; pretend that the standard of living is rising for the black population - a tiny fraction of whom have the means to buy houses, etc.'

'In other words, the regime is suppressing opposition with the utmost ruthlessness, including forced removals, replacement of the pass laws by other forms of control, and upwards of 20,000 people still in detention.'

'It is hiding the fact behind heavy censorship while publicly attempting to give an impression of relaxing and "dismantling" apartheid.'

In one instance, notes the memorandum, vigilantes described by state spokesmen as 'old men of 60' were in fact youths.

By presenting the vigilante squads as a phenomenon representing 'moderates' in the community, the state is trying to distance itself from the atrocities which they commit and to cause divisions in the communities, particularly between young and old.

The regime is unlikely to succeed, the UDF memorandum concludes, because of the flagrant cooperation, plain for all to see, between the vigilantes and the security forces.

The vigilantes, moreover, often come from outside the communities they attack. And it is the communities themselves, and their leaders, which are the main targets for their attacks.

evidence

THE UDF memorandum includes a substantial and detailed appendix of vigilante attacks in different parts of South Africa during the two months December-January 1987. For example:

• **Uitenhage, Eastern Cape** 1,000 to 1,500 vigilantes, calling themselves 'Ama Africa Poqo', went on the rampage in January, attacking UDF supporters and killing two people. Hundreds of residents trying to flee were arrested by municipal police, who were waiting nearby. The attack seems to have been highly planned and coordinated and followed the regime's disbanding of the local community council.

Pro-apartheid elements subsequently tried to present the attack as an internal community clash, a police spokesman said that the vigilantes were 'just a group of concerned people' who had marched through the streets 'calmly' to 'get hold of the troublemakers'.

• **Mandini, Natal** Scores of COSATU workers were attacked in December by vigilantes and KwaZulu bantustan police. Altogether 39 COSATU members were killed that week, following a minimal work stoppage which was itself called to protest at the killing of workers.

• **KwaMakhuze, Natal** The massacre of 12 relatives of a UDF youth activist gained world notoriety but was presented by the regime as the work of the UDF or ANC and an example of 'black on black' violence. The vigilantes, who murdered the family of Victor Nduli with AK47 rifles, made another attempt on his life when he attended the mass burial of his relatives.

• **Khayelitsha, Western Cape** Vigilantes smashed houses and a community centre in December, fulfilling warnings that UDF supporters in Crossroads had received before they were forced to move to the new township.

The vigilantes, assisted by the police and army, left 60-70,000 people homeless in Crossroads through a reign of terror from January-June 1986, intended to crush resistance to forced removals. The new attacks on Khayelitsha seem to represent the next phase of the onslaught, to wipe out the democratic movement.

An article from *Anti-Apartheid News*, April 1987.
(Archived at SAHA as Collection AL2457: W2.1, AAN, 1987)

QUESTIONS FOR SOURCE H

H1.

Using the source, explain what vigilantes were. (4)

H2.

Explain how vigilantes operated during the state of emergency. (6)

H3.

What was the South African government hoping to achieve by using vigilantes? (6)

H4.

This article comes from the British Anti-Apartheid Movement's magazine *Anti-Apartheid News*. Do you think it is a reliable source about the activities of vigilantes in South Africa? (8)

(TOTAL MARKS: 24)

GLOSSARY

collaboration – the act of willingly cooperating with an enemy

destabilisation – to undermine the power of a government or leader by subversive acts, thereby making that government or country less stable

hit squads – state-based groups operating underground and unofficially, involved in political assassinations, threatening individuals etc.

'kits konstabel' – so-called 'instant cops'. They were vigilantes who were often called upon by the government to intervene, with extreme violence, in areas of social unrest

vested interest – a special personal interest in an existing system which prevents a person from making objective decisions regarding that system

FURTHER READING

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Minnaar, A. et al, *The Hidden Hand: Covert operations in South Africa*, HSRC, 1994

Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa, *Report* (5 vols.), Juta, 1998