

The AFRA workshop in August 1985 was attended mostly by representatives of Natal communities threatened with removals. But among the visiting participants was Mrs Beauty Mkize, from Driefontein in the Transvaal, an area at that time also under threat. Mrs Mkize's husband, Saul Mkize, had been shot dead by a policeman in April 1983 during a meeting to protest against the proposed relocation; but Mrs Mkize had continued to identify herself undauntedly with the people's struggle to remain. At the workshop she described some of these struggles and those of her neighbours in KwaNgema.

Both are very old-established communities. The Ngema family acquired their land from the Boers before 1902; Driefontein was bought in 1912 by Pixley ka Isaka Seme (a founder member of the A.N.C.) for the Native Farmers' Association. They adjoin each other in the Wakkerstroom/Piet Retief district of the South-Eastern Transvaal, a fertile and beautiful area. They accommodate something over 20,000 people, of whom about 400 own the land. They were thus in the Government's definition 'Black Spots', and they had been harassed and threatened with relocation by the authorities for many years.

Driefontein was under active threat from 1970, when numbers, the ominous precursors of removal, were painted on houses by Government officials. More numbers were painted on in 1975. Since the community is ethnically mixed - Swazi and Zulu with some Sotho - the first idea seems to have been to divide and sort the people into the separate ethnic 'homelands'. Then there were rumours of a proposed mass relocation to a place called Skaapskraal, with further rumours that this had fallen through because the White farmers there would not sell. Finally Oshoek in KaNgwane was suggested. There seemed relentless determination to move the people somewhere.

As with many other threatened communities, sudden pounces followed by silences and long delays in reply to questions and communications; constituted a demoralising process of attrition. Letters from the authorities varied from the peremptory to the unctious:

I wish to give the assurance that the matter regarding the resettlement of the Driefontein people was properly dealt with by the South African Parliament and reconsideration of the removal is not possible.

(P.Koornhof to S.Mkize, 13-10-81)

Only the terms under which removal will take place are negotiable ... I must stress that like you there are many whites who also had to leave land which they have owned and occupied for generations and on which members of their families were born, raised, and subsequently buried. Everyone of us has to make sacrifices in some way or other to further peace and prosperity in this beautiful country of ours.

(Deputy Minister of Development to Chairman,
Driefontein Community Board, 18-12-81)

In 1982 the Government painted more numbers, this time on gravestones. The total crassness of this action caused outrage in Driefontein and evoked sympathy for the community further afield. An interview with Saul Mkize was published in the New York Times. He said:

When we bury our dead we expect them, as all other people do, to rest in peace... We paid for our land and we wish to keep it.

On instruction from Pretoria, the gravestone numbers were erased. But life was continually made more difficult for Driefontein people in apparent attempts to squeeze them out. Black people are subject to so many regulations that they are extremely vulnerable to bureaucratic pressure. Pensions did not come through, young people's reference books were not issued, renewals of licences were excessively delayed. Roads were not repaired (some became impassable in wet weather). A clinic built by the community was not used: the local hospital was told not to provide back-up services for it as the community was 'soon to move'. For the same reason, the community was refused permission to build extensions to their overcrowded schools with money they themselves had collected.

The community is not a tribe. The government thus has no real basis for manipulating the Driefontein community by appointing a chief willing to be bribed into co-operation with the government. Instead the community administered their affairs through an elected Council Board of Directors.

However, the authorities refused to negotiate with the Council Board, and at one time chiefs from the Piet Retief district were required to endorse reference book application from Driefontein. The worst and most tragic act of harassment was the refusal to allow community meetings; and it was when the police entered the area to break up such a meeting that Saul Mkize was killed in April 1983. The police version of the shooting was that the people had become aggressive and were advancing on the police. Eye-witnesses declared that when the shot was fired the police were separated from the meeting - which was already dispersing - by a six-foot fence.

Saul Mkize's death and the acquittal of the policeman who shot him did not deter the community. By 1984 they had engaged lawyers and, under threat of legal action, new pensions were paid, passes issued, and permission for meetings granted. Subsequently extensions to the school were allowed and a quotation given for the repair of roads.

The completion of the Heyshope Dam on the Assegai River late in 1984 brought the community and the authorities nearer to confrontation. This dam was to inundate about 20% of the area of Driefontein, and early in 1985 the waters began to encroach on some properties. Notices to residents in the path of the waters instructed them to move to higher ground. Queries were sent back 'What higher ground?' but no replies were received.

Many of the same threats and tactics as those against Driefontein had also been practised in KwaNgema. Some of KwaNgema's struggles had focussed particularly on the recognition of a community leader. The landowners constitute an extended family, not a tribe; and also here a committee - the Ngema Committee - was elected to act on the community's behalf. But since this committee was resolutely opposed to the removal, the authorities continually attempted to by-pass it and negotiate with arbitrarily-chosen, compliant, persuadable senior family members whom they styled 'chiefs'. Gabriel Ngema was the first candidate, and on his death in 1984 the choice fell on Cuthbert Ngema. The Committee brought actions in the supreme court contesting Cuthbert's status; but in March 1985 it was ruled that since according to definitions in the Oxford English dictionary the Ngemas could be called a tribe, the provisions of the Black Administration Act applied, and the Government could appoint and give authority to anyone it liked. Cuthbert was known to be willing to negotiate a removal; and if he as 'chief' agreed to it, a removal could go ahead as 'officially negotiated' and 'voluntary', with protests attributed to "internal community disputes".

The Ngemas, although dismayed by this judgement, had not been inactive in the meantime. They had written to Margaret Thatcher and the Queen; and - even more significantly - together with the people of Driefontein, when it seemed established that they were all to be relocated at Oshoek in KaNgwane, they appealed to Mr Mabuza to refuse to co-operate with the removal. In an unprecedented step for a homeland leader, he agreed to their request. He declared, indeed, that he would "never administer any resettlement camp which the Pretoria Government deposited on his doorstep; that he would not incorporate the Driefontein and KwaNgema people in his homeland; that he would ban from his territory any truck carrying displaced people or their possessions."

Parts of KaNgwane were also to be inundated by the Heyshope Dam. In December 1984 the KwaNgema lawyers applied for an interdict against the Department of Water Affairs, preventing them from allowing the water to rise, on the grounds that the community's right to the land was entrenched, that no discussions or arrangements had been made with them about the construction of the dam, and that their lives and properties were endangered. But a significant compromise was reached in this action. The Minister of Co-operation and Development agreed to pay compensation to all households below the purchase line of the dam, to enable them to 'rebuild houses above the purchase line in KwaNgema should they so choose'. The KwaNgema community dropped their action to obstruct the dam.

This agreement could not apply to Driefontein which is more closely settled, with no vacant land available on higher ground. As the water and the tension rose, urgent discussions were arranged between the Driefontein Council Board and the Deputy Minister of Land Affairs. But the Council Board insisted on compensatory land, since money would be of no value to people who were not allowed to buy land with it.

'Money is not a bed', as one resident said. After consultations with a community meeting - the largest ever seen in Driefontein - the Council Board presented a carefully-worked-out, specific, challenging, alternative proposal: that adjoining state-owned land, parts of the farms Grootspruit and Sobbeken lying between Driefontein and KaNgema, should be offered as compensation to the 84 Driefontein landowners affected by the dam; and that they should move themselves and their tenants on to it. Matters were at this stage when Mrs Mkize attended the AFRA workshop, and no reply had yet been received in Driefontein by the Department. But a week after she returned home, she and the community were given their reply by the Deputy Minister. Bold as their proposal had been - that a 'Black Spot' should not only be allowed to remain Black but should actually be extended - it succeeded. The threat of removal was totally removed from these two communities, and the compensatory land granted. Details were finalised in August 1985 - and it emerged that 'big business' had also been involved. The compensatory land proposed had proved insufficient; and Lotzaba Forests, a subsidiary of Barlow Rand, had made extra land available to the Government for the full compensation amount.

Barlow Rand, international publicity, Mr Enos Mabuza, the dam - all these contributed to these communities' reprieve. But their own energy, enterprise, and the undaunted determination through years of threats and harassment had been even more significant. Mr Pickson Mkize, brother of Saul and Chairman of the Council Board of Directors, said, in a statement to the Transvaal Rural Action Committee, that his brother did not die in vain:

This is what my brother was fighting for. In fact he always said he was prepared to die for our land. At many times since his death we have seen that the Government was ready to move us by force; we told them we would rather all die and be buried with him. Now eventually the Government has agreed to leave us peacefully in Driefontein. This is a wonderful day for us but it is also sad. Our leader was killed when in the end all that is needed is sitting down and talking like responsible people.