

resisting a reign of terror

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What sort of conditions induce 2 500 people to flee their homes, cross a border and camp under plastic alongside a national road? The Black Sash in the Border Region compiled a dossier to publicise the plight of the people of Potsdam, Ciskei, giving a graphic insight into life under a reign of terror.



The struggle of a small community against a reign of terror in Ciskei continues after their second attempt to flee the homeland and establish themselves in South Africa was thwarted by the combined forces of the two governments in September.

The 2 500-strong shack community of Potsdam near East London has temporarily closed ranks but remains resolved to find a new home in South Africa, from where the people believe they were unlawfully removed in 1983.

Among the options they are considering is an application to the Supreme Court to be reinstated in South Africa.

In February this year the entire community literally walked out of Ciskei and squatted at the roadside on South African territory. Their freedom lasted four weeks. This month only 50 families managed to get out of Ciskei, only to be trucked back to Potsdam again by SA security forces four days later.

The SA government is clearly not eager to create a precedent by tolerating the Potsdam style of resistance and has avoided official comment on the latest flight from Ciskei. The reaction of its ambassador to Ciskei to the first exodus of this community in February must have caused some embarrassment.

Commenting on the roadside group then, Mr Christiaan van Aardt said: 'As far as I'm concerned what they [the refugees] need is a nice damn thunderstorm to wash them back to Ciskei.' He added:

'The whole thing is politically motivated — you just can't have people deciding to leave their country and going to another.'

With seven foreign embassies alerted to the plight of the Potsdam people now, the pressure is mounting for a political decision on the issue by Pretoria.

Shortly before the community started dismantling its shacks at Potsdam this month, it delivered a written appeal to the foreign governments to intervene on its behalf and pressurise the SA government to provide it with a home. The appeal was accompanied by a dossier of background information on brutalities suffered by the community. It was compiled by the Border branch of the Black Sash, which has been concerned about the problems of the people of Potsdam for the past year.

Writing on behalf of the women of Potsdam, Sylvia Ntwanambi told the embassies that the community had been living under a reign of terror in Potsdam since it was forcibly moved there from Blue Rock (the community's original home which now forms part of Ciskei) by the South African government in 1983. (We have published Mrs Ntwanambi's letter in full on page 28.)

The community has always believed Blue Rock, from where they were removed to Potsdam, to be part of South Africa and themselves to be entitled to South African citizenship. They are prepared to live anywhere but in Ciskei.

The violence at Potsdam peaked in August with the killing of a popular community leader, Zola Nozewu. It is said that the alleged killer, a known vigilante, has not been apprehended by Ciskei police and that he is openly circulating in the community. (See 'Working at the Outposts,' page 47, for an account of official harassment, that continued at Nozewu's funeral.)

The dossier compiled by the Black Sash includes several accounts of gruesome violence residents claim they have suffered at the hands of the Ciskei police and the vigilantes in particular. The two groups work hand in hand, they say. We have published two of the many accounts here.

One comes from a 30-year-old woman, Vuyiswa Feni, who tells how she was subjected to an unprovoked attack by vigilantes and policemen wearing balaclavas and long coats over their green uniforms. She was waiting for a bus at a bus stop in neighbouring Mdantsane at the time.

The second is an extract from an affidavit by Velile Dasi, a 34-year-old man accused of being a 'comrade' and brutally harassed by police and vigilantes.

Potsdam residents have given up hope that reporting the continual incidents of assault to the Ciskei authorities will produce results. Despite claims to the contrary, Ciskei's Director-General of Foreign Affairs and Information, Mr Headman Somtumzi, insists that residents have never laid

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charges with the police, who, he said, would act on 'substantial evidence of attacks'.

It appears that there might have been some pressure behind the scenes on Ciskei to deal with the vigilantes. When the residents fled earlier this month SA policemen told them that they would 'sort out' their problems if they returned to Ciskei. The day after the SA police trucked the refugees back to Potsdam a number of vigilantes were arrested in Ciskei. However, they were released the following day and attacks resumed almost immediately.

The community claims that the victimisation started in 1983, shortly after Ciskei forcibly removed them from Blue Rock to a vacant site adjacent to an existing community in formal housing at Potsdam. Some residents claim that they had lived in Blue Rock all their lives.

In 1982 a South African health inspector, believing Blue Rock to be in his area, condemned the camp. And Ciskei authorities, who believed the area fell under their rule, subsequently announced that the squatters would be given new homes in nearby Mdantsane. That promise has never materialised.

Spokesmen for the group say they have always been treated as

outsiders and have been singled out for harassment. They believe it is a direct result of their refusal to join the ruling Ciskei National Independence Party.

Speaking of the indiscriminate beatings and raids, a spokesman said 'the police threatened to kill everyone here because they say we are stubborn, we won't follow the Ciskei government'.

In June this year an out-of-court settlement was reached following an urgent interdict to prevent police from assaulting a Potsdam detainee.

Residents say detentions and arrests normally follow when they refuse to pay a R10 development tax demanded by the police. Some people's pensions have apparently also been docked for this reason. But residents also claim that payment of the tax was no protection anyway, as many were also arrested on 'political charges'.

The February walkout came when harassment culminated in the police setting up a temporary camp in the Potsdam tribal authority building and carrying out a series of raids from this base. Before the refugees were forcibly returned to Potsdam in a military operation by the South African forces, they received assurances that the harassment would cease from both South African and Ciskeian authorities.

However, reprisals intensified on their return in March. The refugees were shunned by many of the 'permanent' Potsdam residents, children were refused admission to schools and sick people were turned away from clinics in the homeland.

Headman Somtumzi confirmed that 300 people had been arrested and later appeared on charges of failing to pay tax. He denied the assaults and said that if people objected to police activities this was 'an indirect defiance of law and order'.

The Potsdam community does not have any formal organisation but it appears to be a closely knit group with a high level of organisation and determination despite years of repression. For the latest move it collected enough money to hire two trucks and on 2 September the first families off-loaded their possessions on a site on SA territory a stone's throw from their previous home at Blue Rock.

Their limited resources made the move a slow process though and by 4 September only some 30 families had arrived at the site. The move was closely monitored by SA security police but the refugees were allowed through until trucks were returned to Potsdam by a police roadblock in Ciskei later that day.

The following morning the SA police arrived at the site with dogs and ordered the refugees onto trucks. They were taken back to Potsdam where they were dumped along with their belongings in a central place.

Within hours of their return, the community was feeling the anger of the vigilantes, known as 'Inkatha', from whom they had tried to flee. Vigilantes moved from house to house taunting the people about their abortive flight to South Africa. At least two members of the community ended up in hospital after attacks — a teenage boy with two broken legs and a young man with head injuries. But residents insist they will not rebuild their homes in Potsdam.

'We are still waiting for a right place to stay in South Africa,' said one. □

Potsdam residents load up their belongings for the second time to flee Ciskei.



The women of Potsdam write to foreign embassies

We are living under a reign of terror in Potsdam ever since we arrived in 1983. We were taken from Blue Rock in South Africa, being told we would be given houses in Mdantsane, but we were taken to Potsdam and have been beaten ever since we arrived.

Our husbands have been in hiding for the past five months and we are staying alone with our children. Our children are growing up frightened of the police and vigilantes who are always questioning our children about their fathers. When the children do not reply to the questions they are beaten. Even children of 10 years old have been beaten.

When we came to Potsdam we had jobs and TV sets and radios, but now our husbands have lost their jobs because they are always being detained and arrested and beaten up and the police have taken away our possessions. When we came from Blue Rock we had no wounds on our bodies but now some of us are crippled.

When the old people draw their pensions the headman takes R10 tax. We do not know what he does with the tax because we get no receipts. When one old lady refused to pay the R10 they cancelled her pension and she has not been paid for over a year now.

We want you to talk to the South African government and ask them for a residential place for us in South Africa. We are like doves we came to Potsdam with more children than we have now and we need your help.

Yours sincerely,

Sylvia Nkwanambi
on behalf of

WOMEN OF POTSDAM

Statement by Vuyiswa Feni

I, Vuyiswa Feni, residing at Potsdam, am 30 years of age. On 14 June 1987 I was assaulted by Ciskei Policemen and other Potsdam residents, known to us as vigilantes. I know these vigilantes by name: Samadoda Mawindo, Khaya, Victor, Monde.

The four Ciskei policemen were wearing balaclavas and long coats. Under the coats they were wearing green uniforms.

At about 9 a.m. I was waiting for a bus at the bus stop at Zone 14 Mdantsane. I was assaulted by Khaya first: he hit me on the right cheek with his hand. I received an eye injury as a result of this assault. Monde also assaulted me on the same cheek. I fell to the ground. While I was on the ground, Khaya stabbed me in the stomach with a large knife with a black handle. One of the policemen kicked my right arm while I was still lying down bleeding. A well-built policeman told them to leave me. He said that they must have killed me.

I was taken by a friend in his car to the Cecilia Makiwane hospital. I was operated on. As a result of the attack my intestines were exposed (hanging out). I was in hospital for five weeks.

I wish to lay a charge against these attackers.

I wish to lay a civil claim.

SIGNATURE:

WITNESS:

WITNESS:

Velile Dasi's affidavit

This is an extract from an affidavit, submitted to the Ciskei Supreme Court by Velile Dasi, 34, who, with other members of the Potsdam community, sought an urgent interdict to restrain the Ciskei police and civilian vigilantes from harassing and assaulting Potsdam residents.

In mid-1985 many Potsdam residents were arrested by the Ciskeian police and were assaulted. I was arrested amongst these many other people and we were all assaulted with either iron objects, pieces of wire and/or sjamboks. As a result of this assault, I received numerous open wounds and serious injuries and I was admitted for medical attention at the Cecilia Makiwane Hospital. Certain of the bones in my back were found to be broken and I received an open wound on the forehead and right temple, and numerous sjambok wounds.

We were held in custody for one week, and thereafter released on bail. The charges were all withdrawn during June 1986. Throughout 1986, regular and arbitrary assaults upon both myself and other members of the Potsdam community persisted. On occasions there would be a break of between one to three weeks before the Ciskeian police would return and recommence assaults; on other occasions there would be no breaks and we would be assaulted every week. On several occasions, Vernon Moto (a Ciskeian policeman) advised me that the Ciskeian police wanted to kill us all.

During the course of 1986 I was personally assaulted on five separate occasions - on the other occasions when the Ciskeian Police indiscriminately assaulted old and young, mostly women and children, I managed to escape by running and hiding from the police. On the

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occasions that I was assaulted, I was assaulted with sjamboks and kicked with booted feet. On one occasion the police threatened to shoot me with a firearm ...

This persistent interference, harassment and assaults by the Ciskeian Police became so oppressive and intolerable that, in sheer desperation, a decision was made in February 1987 to leave Potsdam and seek refuge in the Republic of South Africa. This was a last resort, in an effort to put an end to the treatment which the Potsdam residents were experiencing at the hands of the Ciskeian police.

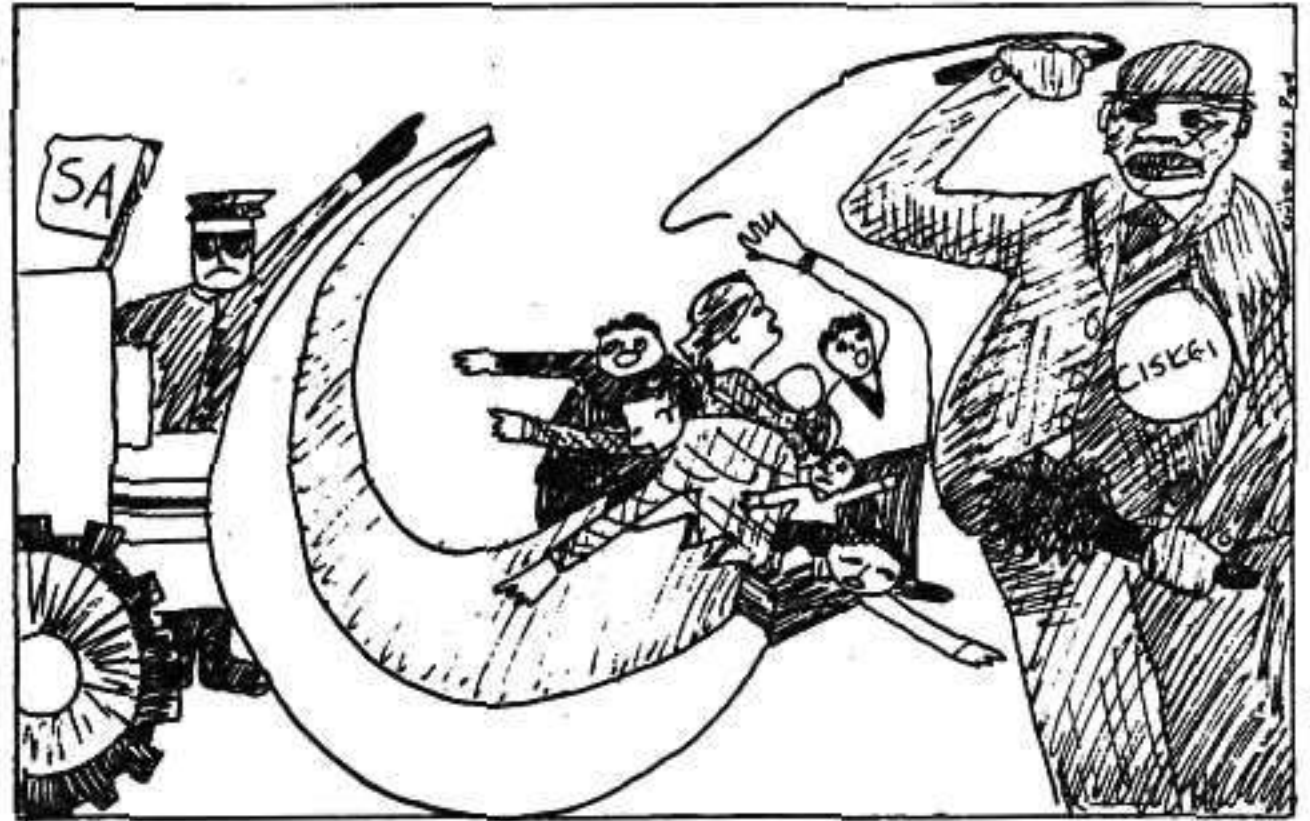
I, together with all the other Potsdam residents, moved in early February 1987 and set up camp on the side of the main King William's Town-East London national road, in the Republic of South Africa ...

At the end of February 1987, we were advised by the South African authorities that we should return to Potsdam, because the Ciskeian authorities had made an undertaking to stop harassing and further assaulting the members of our community.

At approximately the end of February/beginning of March, we were taken back to Potsdam on the strength of this promise.

These indiscriminate assaults by the Ciskeian police on men, women and children recommenced on our return to Potsdam in early March 1987, and have persisted virtually on a daily basis since then until May 1987 when I, together with the other applicants were forced to flee our homes.

Of late there are a group of civilians who have joined with the police in attempting to perpetrate assaults upon [our community]. These civilians have also armed themselves with sticks, bushknives and other dangerous weapons and



Potsdam - between the devil and the deep blue sea.

certain of them have seriously assaulted helpless men, women and children in the presence of, and indeed, with the assistance of, the Ciskeian police, but the Ciskeian police have not taken any action whatsoever in an attempt to prevent assaults by these civilians ...

I and many members of the community have been unable to speak with these civilians as they have moved out of Potsdam itself and spend their time in the company of the police, and sleep at the Tribal Authority offices.

The police and the above-mentioned group of civilians came to my home on three occasions in May 1987 ...

On the first and second visits to my home during May 1987, the police merely said they were looking for me. Then on Friday 22 May 1987 a group of the afore-said civilians who are working with the police came to me and told me directly that they wanted to kill me. [They] alleged that I was a "comrade". ...

On the evening of Thursday 28/Friday 29 May my house was totally destroyed by the police and this group of civilians. This occurred at approximately 22h00 and I was at home at the time. I ran into the darkness when the people arrived and saw them destroy my

house completely by breaking it down. There were certain personal possessions of mine inside the house, but the furniture was chopped to pieces by the crowd and my clothing was taken and vandalised. All this happened in the presence of the Ciskeian police who did nothing to stop these unlawful actions. My wife was ordered out of the house and Khaya Melani (one of the vigilantes) said: "We want Dasi, we want to eat his liver."

I have been forced to seek refuge in the bushes, but am desirous of returning to Potsdam to continue with my normal life. Because the Ciskeian police have not taken any steps to enforce law and order and even associate themselves with the other civilians who have been threatening us and destroying our property, I am unable to return to my wife to rebuild my home.

VELILE DASI

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