

Grasmere — an updated report

People here are raided continuously even though they have agreed to move and are waiting to be transferred to Sebokeng, says Sue Sher. She, Merle Beetge and Josie Orkin are 'on call' to record facts and alert the ad hoc support committee when raids occur.

In mid-January this year some 200 people (mostly men) were arrested in Grasmere during an early Saturday morning raid. They were taken to a specially convened court that day. Most were sentenced to 100 days or fined R100 for squatting illegally in the area; this despite the fact that many of these people are awaiting housing allocated to them in Sebokeng. And that documentation is in their reference books.

About 600 black people 'squat' illegally in camps in the Grasmere region. (An area of plots and smallholdings about 20 kms to the south of Johannesburg, in close proximity to the 'coloured' area of Ennerdale.) Many of the squatters are legally in the area having been recruited as farm labourers. The squatters live in farm out-buildings and corrugated iron shacks, paying rent of R20-R100 a month to their landlords.

For many years it had been the practice for farmers from Grasmere to go out to the country areas to recruit workers who then lived and worked on the farms and whose children were born there. In 1974 the Department of Community Development expropriated the farms and within a couple of months the white farmers moved out, leaving their black labourers on the deserted farms.

Since 1977, with the development of Ennerdale and the expropriation of farmland by the Department of Community Development, the squatters have been subjected to increasingly frequent harassment by officials of the Oranje-Vaal Administration Board. On August 5, 1983 a deadline to leave the area was delivered to the squatters by officials of this Board. When this deadline was not met, Administration Board raids took place on an almost daily basis.

Then in October, 1983, Mr Ganz, of the Oranje-Vaal Board stated in the Press and later confirmed with the Black Sash at a meeting, that the squatter families would be housed in Sebokeng 'whether they qualify to be in the area or not'.

But during October officials from the Board updated the records of the squatters. Those who qualified to live in the area would be given houses in Sebokeng, those who were legally entitled to work in the area would be given hostel accommodation and the others must return to their 'homeland' areas. Two weeks notice was given to the latter group. The former two groups were told that they would be moved after the schools closed in December. (The children were writing exams at schools in Soweto.)

In mid-December an abortive move was made to Sebokeng from one of the Grasmere camps. Shacks were demolished and goods taken to Sebokeng. Three

young boys aged 13, 12 and 3 were sent along to guard the belongings. The trucks were supposed to return to collect the families concerned to transport them to their new homes. Three days later however nothing had happened and the people were then forced to hire a truck in order to retrieve the children and their belongings. They have again erected their shacks in Grasmere.

The most recent date for the removal to Sebokeng was given as early in January. But the squatters are still waiting. Meanwhile the children have lost their places at their Soweto schools and it is too far for them to commute to schools in Sebokeng.

All the while raids have continued on the squatter groups. And recently squatters who spoke to Black Sash and PFP members have been subjected to police enquiry..

There have been many alleged incidents of assault, arson, and intimidation by groups of 'unknown' men on the squatter community. The police say they are investigating these incidents. The people of Grasmere accept that they have to leave the area. But, despite official assurances, they are still waiting to be moved. And the raids continue.



Sue Sher interviews worried squatters who qualify for housing in Soweto but are hopelessly far down on the waiting list — and have been warned to leave Grasmere within 14 days.