

These people were apparently being evicted for non-payment of rent arrears but all around were stories that they had not been informed that the Rent Board had increased their rent; or that they had the money available but had been unable to make contact with the agent who was supposed to collect it; or that the money had been refused because it was late.

They are not criminals. They are working people or mothers with children to care for. They have been earning sufficient to pay the rents set by the Rent Board, exorbitant though they appear to be in terms of what is offered and the general condition of the buildings. They are responsible human beings paying their dues to the community and trying to get on with their lives, caring for themselves and their families and asking nothing but to be left in peace in the homes they have managed to find for themselves.

Their good humour in the circumstances is amazing, their friendliness, their helpfulness to each other, their readiness to talk to anyone with a friendly face. They have been evicted from their homes. The Sheriff, assisted by the police, has 'entered and removed'. It must be said that those who were doing the moving seemed to be taking care. But nevertheless things got broken. A box of crockery was dropped. People's homes were spread along the pavement, in the gutter, in the street.

There is always something rather pitiful about the exposure to the public gaze of the accoutrements of

people's lives. Look at any household in the process of an ordinary, normal move. Goods and chattels waiting to be loaded have a curiously detached, abandoned, lost look about them, moved out of their context. The home in which they belong has been dismantled. None of the loving thought which has gone into their acquisition and their placing is visible. They always look sad.

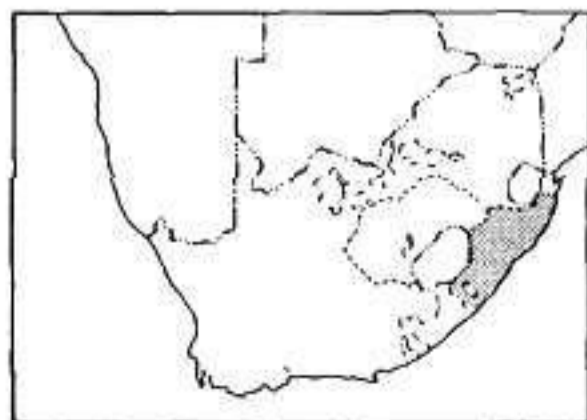
But when a home has been forcibly dismantled, when its contents have been summarily dumped on the pavement and in the street, when they are subjected to the unsympathetic and sometimes hostile gaze of passers-by, they make one want to weep. One thinks of how hard the lives of most of the occupants of such flats must inevitably have been, how hard they still are, how they must have struggled to acquire all those possessions, big and small, that go towards the creation of a home. And one looks at beds and bedclothes and tables and chairs and cupboards and buckets of kitchenware and fridges and mirrors and curtains - all clean, all cared for, all the culmination of someone's dreams or hopes or efforts. The dispossessed children are climbing over them, looking for a little fun. Bits of paper blow around them. Some are precariously balanced. Others look better built for survival.

One looks, and one wonders about man's inhumanity to man and about a system that can allow such things to happen, and about the callousness and heartlessness of all of us who read or see or pass by and who forget. □

nowhere to live, nowhere to go

Homelessness is a phenomenon usually associated with a major natural disaster. But in South Africa the devastating summer floods made only a minor contribution to the staggering statistical news that one in every six South Africans is homeless. Joyce Harris sums up the material presented at the National Conference on this theme.

Between them, the Group Areas Act, the Land Acts and the Black Communities Development Act are responsible for the crisis of homelessness which is besetting the entire country, in rural as well as urban areas. These laws zone land racially, they control who may live where, and they apportion approximately 13% of the land to approximately 80% of the people. All this has had - and is still having - dire consequences for millions of dispossessed people.



Natal



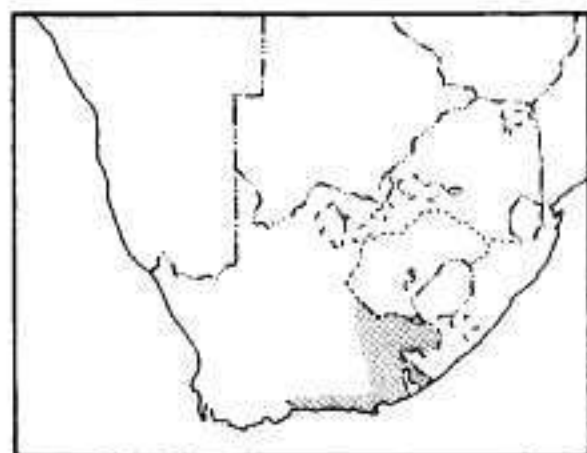
Homeless, Mr Samuel Nyaole of the Eastern Cape, sits where he lives, surrounded by everything he owns.

At the Black Sash National Conference, reports from all regions painted a picture of dispossession, alienation, overcrowding, people with nowhere to go and nowhere to live even though they may be employed and earning. People forced off the land they have farmed for generations, communities destroyed, shacks and homes demolished, a sense that people are being mercilessly hounded, shifted, uprooted to accommodate an impossible ideology.

Homelessness must be one of the most horrific conditions with which to have to cope. Shelter is fundamental to life, and to be without it, or perhaps even worse, to have it destroyed from over the heads of those who have so painfully constructed it, really boggles the imagination. Yet in South Africa one person in six is homeless!

Natural disasters did play a role in this process. The *Natal* floods devastated the homes of approximately 500 000 people. Political conflict in this province also contributed to the homelessness problem through the destruction of township houses that were burnt or destroyed in various ways.

From the *Eastern Cape* came the news of the removal of people from Langa - another example of the government's determination to implement the Group Areas Act. People were moved from their well-established



Southern and Eastern Cape

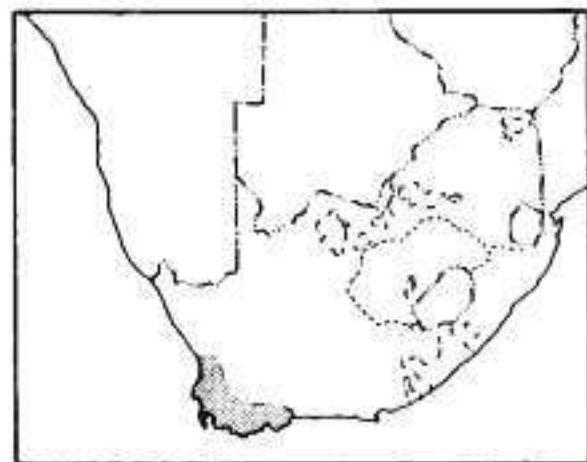
homes into tents on a barren hillside at the cost of R13.5-million. The community had proposed an alternative: an upgrading scheme, the first phase of which would have cost R3.5-million. Removals were carried out at night with the use of searchlights and the municipal police conducted an intense programme of intimidation.

In the Port Elizabeth area, 215 538 people are living in shacks in a constant state of fear of demolition, be-

cause there are no alternative sites as a result of the Land Acts and the Group Areas Act.

Major housing projects and incentives favour the middle income group and the government is not addressing the housing problem of the poor. In the mean while the shacks of the so-called illegal squatters continue to be demolished. A number of the squatters have had to live out in the open near to where their shacks once stood.

From the *Western Cape*: Khayelitsha, the government's answer to the acute housing problem for blacks in the Cape Town area, is on the bleak Cape Flats, 25 kms from the centre of Cape Town. There are presently an estimated 200 000 people living there. It is the place to which all black people who are considered to be trespassing or squatting are sent and grows steadily every day. There are houses, core houses and an emergency camp of shacks.



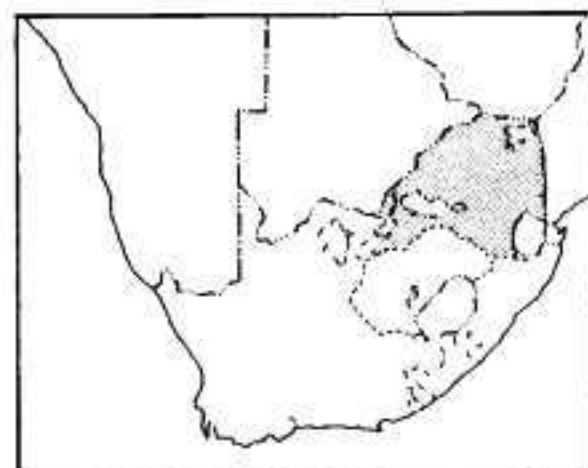
Western Cape

There has been upgrading to provide schools, hospitals, churches, welfare organisations and even transport in the form of a new railway line. But unemployment is rife and people cannot afford to travel to Cape Town to seek work. They keep alive through self-help.

Cape Town itself is a city in crisis. The black population in the Cape Metropolitan Area will have grown from 133 889 in 1970 to an estimated 1 379 330 in 2 000. It is estimated that by 1990, 400 000 workseekers will lack formal employment and be unemployed or supporting themselves in the informal sector. The poverty is already desperate. Five out of seven coloured tenants are in arrears. There is presently a housing shortage of some 800 000 units. The brutal demolition of squatters' shacks in Cross-

roads, KTC and elsewhere has been well documented. Apart from being inhuman, it is also incomprehensible in the context of the housing shortage.

From *Border*: There is a housing shortage of 340 000 units, acute poverty and people having to choose between food and shelter because they cannot afford both.



Transvaal

From the *Transvaal*: There is a massive shortage of both houses and land. Only about 25% of Africans would be able to make any contribution to housing costs yet the government is unwilling to build low-cost housing. There is a stubborn resistance in the white councils even to acknowledge the existence of many black homeless people let alone to do anything constructive about this crisis.

Yet there are arrests and/or demolitions in many areas in the PWV. People are shunted from site to site, still with no lawful home. Homelessness occurs in backyards, and on open land in 'black' urban areas, in 'grey' areas and 'white' areas, and in many very small and not-so-small groups on peri-urban land designated for every group other than the people living on it.

It is no wonder, therefore, that people tend to live wherever they can find a place for themselves - frequently 'illegally', in shacks, or tents, or overcrowded houses, or in flats or houses in the so-called 'white' areas if they can afford to do so.

And always they are living under conditions of extreme stress and the fear of demolition or eviction or arrest. For each and every one of them the circumstances carry all the seeds of tragedy with very little in the way of hope for a more stable kind of existence in the future. What a terrible way this is in which to have to live. □