

Since the declaration of the second State of Emergency on 12 June 1986, members of the Black Sash in the Albany Region have monitored detentions in ten Eastern Cape towns: Grahamstown, Port Alfred, Kenton, Alexandria, Somerset East, Riebeeck East, Alicedale, Bedford, Fort Beaufort and Adelaide. A year later, in June 1987, we initiated a debriefing project which made it possible for us to systematise detention data in more detail, identify trends and draw some tentative conclusions. Between June 1987 and April 1988 some 200 ex-detainees were debriefed.

With the exception of the PWV Triangle, detention in the Eastern Cape has, until recently, been far more widely used than in any other part of the country. In this area alone, approximately 1 200 persons have been detained. Detentions peaked at the start of the State of Emergency in June/August 1986, with a slower intake in September/November 1986. From September 1986, releases slowly started to counterbalance new arrests until April/May 1987. On 11 June 1987, the last day of the Emergency year, a mass release of 60 detainees gave hope that many more would follow, but this did not happen. Instead there has been a gradual decline in the number of detainees and by the end of March 1988, it was estimated that 67 detainees were still being held. These included the top leadership in the Eastern Cape.

Detention is no longer routine, but is still used as a strategy to control organisations. On the eve of a recent stay-away, for example, some trade union officials were arrested and most are still detained. Some local community leaders have also been re-detained. Others have been warned that they are under surveillance and will be re-detained if there is any trouble in the community. They are out of the cell, but not far beyond the exercise yard.

Analysis of our data suggests that the underlying purpose of detentions is

what may be described as 'destabilisation' or 'disorganisation'. It is one of the many methods used by the state to suppress community mobilisation - the emergence of 'people's power' - by direct intervention and control. As a strategy it destabilises both communities and individuals. This is evidenced by the length of detentions and the emphasis on the detention of young adults. On average, debriefed detainees had been held for an average of ten months and over half were under the age of 26.

detentions are arbitrary. But randomness is also strategic as it is used to unnerve communities and break down people.

Ex-detainees describe prison life as dull and repressive. Health standards are also unsatisfactory. On arrival each inmate is given two mats and four or five blankets. These detainees informed us that there was lice in the bedding and that it was very cold during the winter months. Food was another source of dissatisfaction. They mentioned that the food was often

dirty and that worms were sometimes found in the meat. They all had to supplement their diet with extra milk, bread, biscuits and whatever other food they could get. They also complained about the indifferent attitude of some of the warders who they felt were 'harsh and uncaring'. Long isolation under these conditions tends to weaken a person mentally, emotionally and physically.

The long-term effects of detention are difficult to determine and may well be more complex than appears now, but people and organisations have undeniably been damaged. Family economies and relationships have

been severely strained and the fact that people must cope with detentions means that vast amounts of individual and community energy is deflected from other constructive work. This may well be part of the intended strategy. However, supporting detainees and their families and working to counteract the ill effects of their detention are tasks which can help reorganisation too.

Support for detainees and their families has involved the families themselves, friends and resource groups based in Grahamstown: The Legal Resources Centre and certain law firms, Dependents' Conference, the Black Sash and the South African Committee on Higher Education (SACHED). These individuals and groups have worked closely together to organise visits, pocket money,

life after detention.

priscilla hall and marianne roux

A small team of women have quietly interviewed and 'debriefed' more than 200 people as they came out of detention in the Eastern Cape. This pioneering project, undertaken by the Black Sash's Albany Region, gives new insight into detention experiences and reveals another prong of the government's 'destabilisation' strategy.

Extensive debriefing shows that random detention has been used in every town. Many detainees were never questioned and very few were given reasons for their arrest and continued detention. Some were told they were arrested because of the violence and that they would be released when the violence stopped. A woman from Port Alfred said she was told that she should not cook for comrades at funerals. Our report reveals that it was mainly the leadership that was extensively questioned either shortly after being detained or before their release. The pattern has been to transfer these detainees to police stations in the smaller towns for a period of two to three weeks, to be interrogated and then given a warning, before their release. Beyond the ranks of leadership,

clothing, study material and some legal backup for detainees. Family grants are also an important area of assistance.

Of equal importance is support for ex-detainees. Their resilience varies as does their prison experience. A great deal depends on how much strain they and their families can be spared and on local attitudes towards them. It is more difficult for people to recover when the family is coping with massive economic and personal strain.

The debriefing project has enabled us to pinpoint more systematically the problems detainees face on release. Two immediate forms of follow-up are medical and psychological examination and treatment.

It has been extremely difficult to provide adequate medical services to ex-detainees from places such as Alexandria, Alicedale, Adelaide and Bedford, amongst others. Originally arrangements were made for ex-detainees to be examined by a National Medical and Dental Association (NAMDA) team in Port Elizabeth. However, these arrangements proved to be very awkward and cumbersome. As an alternative a local doctor was approached. She agreed to examine patients once or twice a week. During the period between July 1987 and April 1988 she has examined 175 ex-detainees. Of these, 143 have received further treatment. The most common ailments are backaches, eye-problems, coughing and tight chests, headaches, stomach upsets and insomnia.

For ex-detainees medical check-ups have been a major concern, not only because prison life is debilitating, but because medical examinations and treatment in prison clinics are unsatisfactory. The majority felt they were not properly examined and that medication received often failed to address their symptoms.

The Psychology Clinic at Rhodes University and the outpatients staff at Fort England have been very helpful. During this period, 73 ex-detainees have been referred to one of these institutions for psychological treatment.

A few of the people were found to be nearly suicidal. The others have had a range of symptoms within the spectrum of 'post-traumatic stress disorder', notably loss of memory and concentration, emotional instability and various forms of depression.

Recovery is made more difficult by the lack of a job and income, which often the lot of the ex-detainee. Our data shows that the loss of income to ex-detainees has been considerable. Many have lost their jobs, none received notice pay in detention and all



(above) the EWE project underway and (below) group solidarity during a short break.

who had been in detention for nine months or longer had forfeited their UIF benefits. The 'halo effect' of detention means that their chances of once again becoming a breadwinner drop considerably. People in this position have said that this is one of the main reasons for their continued depression.

Our data highlights the enormous problems ex-detainees experience in re-entering the outside world after a long term of isolation. They don't seem to fit in again, and often feel guilty at what they perceive as a personal failure as a democrat, friend, father, husband, lover and so on. However, with good community education there is the potential for remedial work, thus ameliorating the

after-effects of detention.

The need for continued education among detainees and ex-detainees was the spur behind a new study programme that started last year. The project called 'Each Working in Education' (generally known by its acronym EWE, which means 'Yes' in Xhosa) is run by Dependants' Conference and SACHED in Grahamstown for two main purposes: to find study courses for people in or out of jail whose academic year has been disrupted by detention and to give academic support to ex-detainees. EWE students at home for a co-operative which shares information and planning through regular regional meetings. EWE exists in all the towns under review, including Cradock.

EWE also has some hidden benefits in that the study groups help with the awkward transition back into open society. Not only are they direction-giving, but study is, in itself, a mental exercise which helps ex-detainees regain their memories, concentration and general stability.

Another scheme in this region is the setting up of co-operatives to generate and circulate income. Production co-operatives may well provide an alternative source of income to those ex-detainees who have lost their jobs. So far only Alexandria has one, but indications are that co-operatives will be a major focus for the next few years.

Community revival is bound to take new forms. We do not expect to see detentions ending or overt mass organisations developing to a significant degree under present circumstances. Perhaps the only good aspect of detention was that it brought hundreds of people together from all over the region at a time when not even ten people could meet together in one township.

To sum up, the state's use of detention as a destabiliser and repressive tactic seems evident. Community support for those detained consumes a lot of local energy, but it can become the basis for reorganisation. □