

Interview with a hunger striker

In January 1989, after two and a half years in detention, United Democratic Front (UDF) Northern Transvaal organiser Blessing Mphela and 19 other Diepkloof detainees decided to go on an indefinite hunger strike.

Their hunger strike was the forerunner to a nationwide hunger strike involving some 350 detainees which forced Law and Order Minister Adriaan Vlok to release large numbers of detainees.

Mphela was on hunger strike for 24 days. On behalf of Critical Health, Kerry Cullinan, of the New Nation, spoke to him about his experiences. Much of the interview concerning his treatment and conditions in detention, cannot be printed in terms of the Emergency regulations.

CH: How do you feel now?

BM: It all seems like a dream now - that hunger strike. We did not know whether we would survive those days but we knew we had to go on.

What made you decide to go on hunger strike?

Some of us had been in detention under terrible conditions for over two years without any promise of release. We had tried many times through memorandums to the authorities and court cases to secure our release, but had no success.

We believed that we would be kept in detention until the end of the emergency, and we believe that the government can't rule without the emergency which meant that we would be held for a long time. We were especially worried when they started justifying the emergency by saying that there had been one in Zimbabwe for over 12 years.

How did your relatives react to your decision to refuse food until you were released?

They were worried because they realised that it could mean we would die. But they also supported our decision because we had been inside for so long with no hope of release. We got a lot of support from them, which made us strong.



Trevor Manuel with his family - the first of a number of political detainees released following the national hunger strike

How did you feel while on hunger strike?

The first few days were very bad. We felt very hungry and very dizzy as our bodies tried to adjust to the terrible stress.

The worst time though was the second week. That was when we started feeling really dizzy and getting bad stomach cramps. Most of us thought we wouldn't make it through that week, especially as we had been warned of the terrible effects of going on hunger strike.

Mentally, our resolve was strong and we were determined to carry out our action even if it meant death. But when some people collapsed that week, it affected us badly. We did not know whether they had been permanently damaged, and we also did not know what would happen to us. We could not be sure that we would be released.

Were you hospitalised?

Yes, but only on the 22nd day. I had to threaten the prison doctor with legal action before he would agree to send me to the hospital.

What was the attitude of hospitals, generally, to the hunger strikers?

We were worried about their attitude at first, as they tried to force us to start eating. Initially, some hunger strikers were sent back to prison by the hospitals because they refused to eat.

Their attitude only changed when attention was focussed on the hunger strike, and they realised that they would look really bad if they were seen refusing to admit us for no reason at all.

How were you treated by the hospital staff?

I was in the Jo'burg Gen. Treatment there was generally very good. Generally, the doctors were very fine. There were a few exceptions that co-operated with the prison authorities, but the rest of the doctors and the nurses treated us well.

Some of the matrons were very hostile to us though. One kept on asking the security police when we were going to be taken away. We were also not allowed visitors, and one of the matrons phoned the police when some of our family members managed to get in to see us. We asked her why she was doing police work.

But our health was monitored well, and we were also given psychological help. The doctors also put me on a glucose and vitamin C drip at first because I was very weak.

NAMDA also played a very important role in monitoring the hunger strike, and giving second opinions in medical matters.

Do you feel the demands of the hunger strikers have been met?

No. Most of us have been released into another prison through heavy restrictions. We demanded that we be unconditionally released, but we are now expected to monitor ourselves.

No offence has been proven against us, but we are still being punished and we don't understand why.

We demand that our restrictions are lifted. We are not entering into any contract with the government to monitor ourselves.

Our demands that detention without trial be abolished and the state of emergency lifted also remain unchanged, as does our commitment to see a free, democratic South Africa in our lifetime.

What do you think organisations should be doing to help detainees and those recently released?

Vlok has threatened organisations involved in helping detainees, but I think it is very important that they help us to adapt to society again. These detentions have been at huge cost to many of us in terms of our personal programmes. Many of us have lost our jobs, or cannot study anymore. Organisations should find ways of accommodating people and make them feel accepted back into society and the new conditions that face



A member of the Black Sash stages a placard demonstration on a busy Johannesburg street

us. For example, I worked for the UDF before my detention but on my release, I cannot work for the Front any longer because it was banned while I was in detention.

Organisations must find a way of engaging restricted people in meaningful work, instead of leaving us to find our way on our own. It is very hard to adapt to these new conditions.

What are your plans now?

Well, I would really like to further my studies. I was studying at Turfloop before my detention. But I am restricted to Johannesburg and to my Soweto home at night, so I cannot return to the campus.

I also have a responsibility to support my family. I have a five year old daughter, Fundo. So I must find employment and earn some money.

If you were re-detained, would you go on hunger strike again?

Definitely!