

# Complex issues underline Ciskei violence

By Hermien Kotzé

**THE** violent aftermath of the Ciskei coup d'état in Mdantsane left many white East Londoners stunned, angry, scared and confused. Most reacted with stereotyped racial comments and white fear intensified. There was even talk of leaving the country.

The African community was also shocked at the fury of the violence and the extent of the damage. MDM leaders tried to intervene but to no immediate avail. They eventually attributed the looting and burning to the "criminal element" in Mdantsane, an explanation that Idasa in the Border region felt needed more in-depth investigation.

Although we could in no way condone the violence, we felt that its root causes were numerous and complex and needed to be properly analysed. It was also seen as crucial that people in the East London and Border region should be informed, so an emergency meeting entitled "Why the Violence?" was called.

We were very fortunate to have Brigadier Oupa Gqozo, leader of the new Military Council in the Ciskei, UCT economics professor Francis Wilson and UDF Border president Mluleki George as speakers. The turn-out of an estimated 700 to 800 people was an all-time record for Idasa in East London.

Before attempting to analyse the events in Mdantsane, it is important to give a brief background on the months preceding the coup in early March. The seeds of the rebellion that culminated in the removal from power of Lennox Sebe can probably be found in the much publicised Peulton issue.

The struggle of the people of East Peulton, who were forcibly incorporated into Ciskei in August 1988, made it clear to other people living in Ciskei that it was possible to take on the Ciskei regime.

In January this year rumours started circulating that villagers from the Chulumna area near East London were collecting their Ciskei National Independence Party (CNIP) membership cards and returning them to the tribal authorities or burning them.



It is important to know that without these cards, which have to be bought, access to any facilities or social services in the Ciskei - including pensions, housing, education, health services, trading licences - was impossible.

By returning or destroying these cards, villagers obviously risked losing their livelihoods, but they were so fed-up with the Sebe regime that they went even further, publicly rejecting the Ciskei government and expressing their desire to be part of a unitary, non-racial and democratic South Africa.

The rebellion quickly spread throughout rural Ciskei.

Eventually rumours of a full-scale popular uprising were rife and a week before the coup, young comrades were reported to be collecting CNIP cards in wheel-barrows in the streets of Mdantsane. It was also rumoured that on the morning before the coup, villagers were already dancing in the streets in celebration of Sebe's fall from power.

Even if it was the military that finally got rid of Sebe, it seems that it was the struggles of the people of Ciskei, especially those in the rural areas, that finally made

his political survival impossible. These people, seemingly, had simply had enough after decades of extreme poverty, unemployment, excessive and unfair taxation, a bias in "state" expenditure for urban/prestige projects, and massive repression.

The new political climate in South Africa raised people's expectations of a better future, while Sebe responded with a state of emergency and renewed police brutality.

Over 30 people were shot by police in different parts of the Ciskei during celebrations for the release of Nelson Mandela. In Mdantsane, police drove into the crowd and started shooting at random, killing at least 10 people. In Alice three days later, the head of the Ciskei security police drove his car into a crowd, injuring 22 people including a 12-year-old girl who subsequently died.

Sebe's alleged hit squad was also rumoured to be very active at this time, attacking well-known activists, among them Jeff Wabena, in their homes in Mdantsane.

It is thus quite clear, even before launching into a more complex analysis of the situation, that there had been an incredible amount of extreme anger brewing all over the Ciskei and that an explosive situation



**ABOVE:** Looting and burning followed Ciskei's coup on March 4.

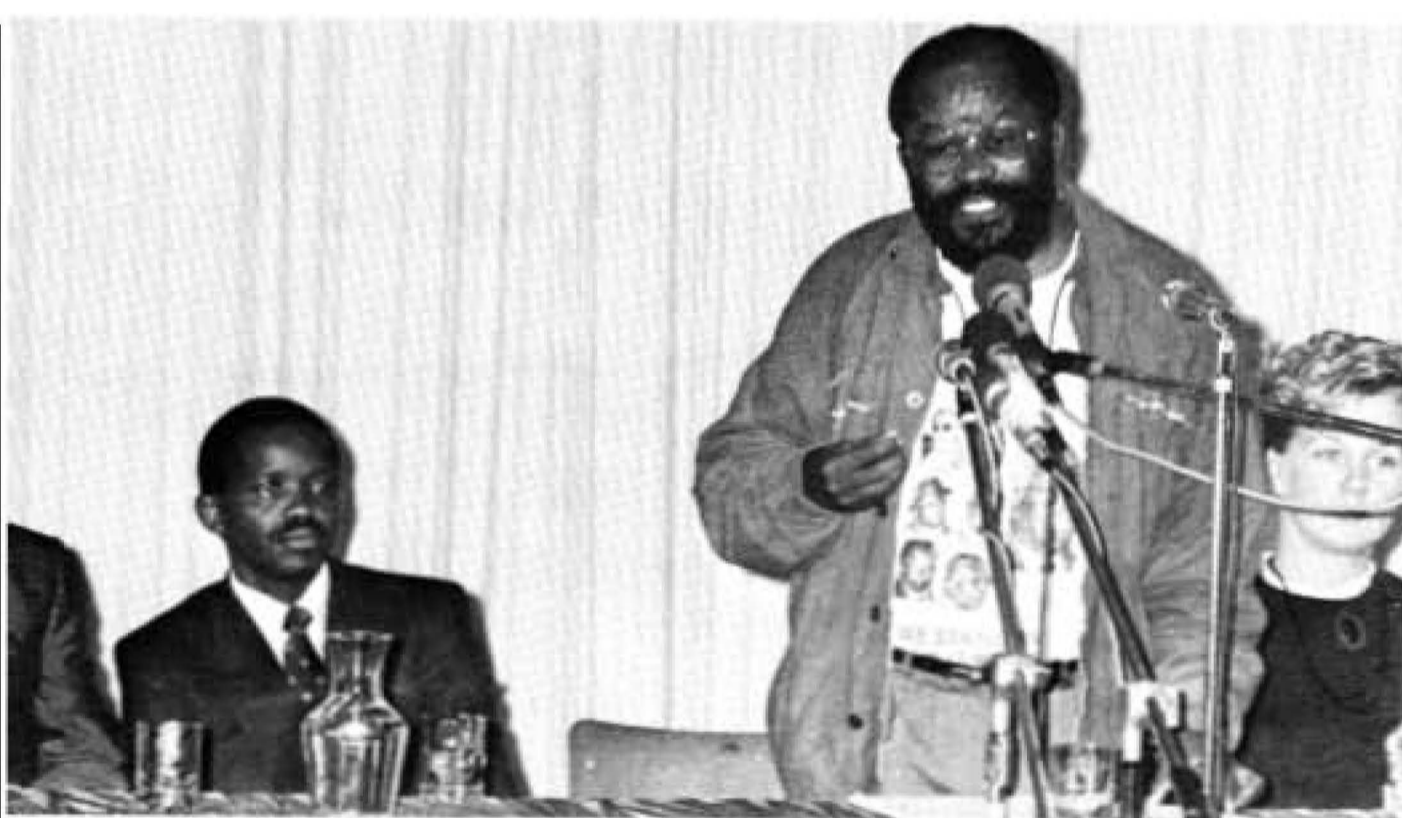
**LEFT:** Brigadier Oupa Gqozo addresses a crowd in Bisho after the coup.

**RIGHT:** The UDF president in the Border region, Mluleki George, at the Idasa public meeting in East London.





AFRAPIX



Poverty: The South African Challenge".

According to him, roughly 50 percent of all South African households and 60 to 65 percent of black households live below the poverty datum line. In the bantustans, four out of five families live below the breadline.

Poverty in South Africa is inextricably linked with inequality. Wilson quoted a 1978 survey that found South Africa to have the highest degree of inequality of all the 57 countries for which statistics were available.

"In a society with too high a degree of inequality, human community becomes impossible," he said.

**AN IMAGE** summoned by Wilson to illustrate this situation was that of an elderly black woman in the rural areas, trekking home with a bundle of precious fuel – firewood weighing between 30 and 50kg – on her head.

She walks 5km in five hours and on her way passes underneath an Eskom power line shunting electricity to switches for stoves and lights far away.

South Africa supplies 60 percent of Africa's electricity while 80 percent of black households in this country have no access to this labour-saving and cheaper form of power.

Another index of the extent of poverty and inequality in South Africa is the infant mortality rate (IMR), the number of babies per thousand who die before their first birthdays, used internationally as an indicator of the wellbeing of a country's population.

Figures for 1981 to 1985 in South Africa show the IMR for white babies is 12 per thousand, while for black babies it is between 94 and 124. Thus a black mother is eight times more likely to lose her baby than a white mother.

Overcrowding in black townships is another manifestation of poverty and a direct result of government policy. In Soweto an average 15 to 20 people live in each of the standard "match-box" houses. The situation in Mdantsane is very similar.

This situation arose because the government refused for many years to accept the

existed before the military takeover. In retrospect, the eruption of seemingly senseless violence should have been predictable.

It would be shortsighted, however, to look for the causes of violence only within the Ciskei. Many have to be sought in the wider political and socio-economic context of South Africa.

**THE** first issue that needs to be addressed is the violent nature of the apartheid system itself. Mluleki George began his address by making this point.

Small wonder, he said, that after living with all the feelings of frustration, anger and hopelessness created by the violent system under which they have been forced to live, African people finally respond with counter-violence.

This statement can be interpreted in at least two ways. Firstly it says that people resort to violent actions as an expression of their political powerlessness. Secondly, it says that people resort to violence because it has become institutionalised in society, or, to quote George: "It's the only language the white government understands."

It is particularly the latter that should be of grave concern to all South Africans.

Black children grow up with a continual and often provocative police and army presence in the townships. They have often been bystanders at, sometimes participants in, the most horrific scenes imaginable. Many, some as young as 10 years, have passed through detention cells. Many have never really experienced childhood as it is generally perceived throughout the world. And they are the leaders of tomorrow – as politicians are so fond of proclaiming.

Most white children, on the other hand, grow up in a protected environment, but often exposed to racist attitudes, whether by osmosis or by direct tutelage. Schooled in the Christian National tradition and raised in a militarised society, they often take racism and violent action against black South Africans for granted.

These children are also supposed to be the leaders of tomorrow. The question is how can these young South Africans – and in fact our whole society – be "de-programmed"?

Another cause of violence in South Africa and specifically the Ciskei, is the massive poverty experienced by the majority of black South Africans. This is the opinion of Francis Wilson, co-author of "Uprooting



permanence of black people in the urban areas of South Africa and refused therefore to provide adequate housing.

Overcrowding, coupled with increasing landlessness, is also a major problem in the rural areas of the bantustans. Again it is the direct consequence of government policy aimed at preventing black people from settling in the urban areas of "white" South Africa.

Population density figures provided by Wilson show that people live in the Cape at a density of two people per square kilometre, in the Free State at nine people per square kilometre, and in Ciskei at 82 people per square kilometre.

**In 1951** the Tomlinson Commission recommended that at least half the then population of the Ciskei would have to be moved if the agricultural potential of the land were to be developed. The government paid no heed and between 1970 and 1982 the population of the Ciskei doubled.

Increasing landlessness is thus the plight of the people who live there. In the Keiskammahoek district, for example, the average size of landholdings fell 75 percent between 1946 and 1981, from 1,7 hectares to less than half a hectare.

Overcrowding, in conjunction with political and socio-economic dilemmas, exacerbates situations, causes family tensions, adds to instances of wife-battering, incest, rape and so on. Wilson said the degree of overcrowding and its consequences was one of the most seriously damaging manifestations of poverty in South Africa today – "the bitter fruit of powerlessness".

Another factor is unemployment, which has been rising steadily. In 1970 it stood at 12 percent of the workforce, in 1981 at 21 percent and today at 25 percent. In Mdantsane it could be anything from 30 to 50 percent.

Wilson emphasised the human suffering caused by unemployment. Apart from the obvious implications of unemployment on peoples' levels of living, it seems that it is the destruction of human dignity that is the fundamental problem.

Unemployed people interviewed for the Second Carnegie Inquiry into poverty stressed their feelings of not being useful, not being able to make a contribution to society. Wilson quoted an unemployed Lesotho man as saying: "It is as if these hands of mine have been cut off and I am useless. I can do nothing, I cannot contribute."

The psychological impact on a people experiencing such high degrees of unemployment together with the dehumanising experience of decades of apartheid can only be speculated upon.

If one adds that the bantustans have the highest incidences of unemployment and that unemployment affects the youth in particular, it all adds up to an understanding of the pent-up frustrations that exploded in Mdantsane in March.

But why all these explanations and statistics? What have they to do with the violence in Mdantsane? "Everything", we were assured by Wilson, "because as we are examining the why's of poverty, we get closer to the whys of violence."

He attributed poverty to a complicated network of causes but stressed that they were all man-made, with their origins in the history of the last 300 years: a history of

conquest, slavery, pass laws, migrant labour, segregation and, finally, apartheid.

The system of migrant labour and its implications for life in the "reserves" – as the bantustans were then called – needs special mention. The discovery of diamonds (1867) and gold (1886) set South Africa's industrial revolution in motion. It was, however, an industrial revolution with a difference, in that black workers were not allowed to bring their families with them. They had to come as "single units" on contracts ranging from six months to two years.

Wilson quoted a journal published by Lovedale Press in 1940 as writing: "Is it possible that the government does not realise that areas like the Ciskei are in effect being converted into mining villages and that the mainstay of the population is becoming dependent on the wages earned in that industry?"

The Ciskei was in effect already a "satellite" of the central economy. Wages earned in Johannesburg and other urban areas were spent there, while the Ciskei (and other reserves) and its people became increasingly impoverished. Workers from all the reserves (and further afield) contributed their labour and spending power to the wealth of the urban areas, but were not allowed to "inherit" that wealth. They and their children and grandchildren had to "live" elsewhere.

The important point, said Wilson, is that the poverty we find in the rural areas of

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South Africa is not poverty which has always been. It is a poverty produced by the very same process that produced the wealth of Johannesburg.

A last facet of the man-made causes of poverty is the pattern of state expenditure in South Africa. This expenditure shows a constant and dramatic bias in favour of the white population. Given the well-known differentials in state expenditure on education, it is not surprising that whites are at present better educated than blacks and thus employed in higher salaried jobs.

I would also like to speculate that a real "frustrated consumerism" is rampant in the townships, especially among the youth.

Television and radio daily proclaim the "good life" as consisting of the use and/or possession of a variety of luxury goods. This message is enhanced by the example of the lifestyle of most whites and nouveau riche or homeland bourgeoisie in the townships.

The result is a revolution of rising expectations: expectations that can certainly not be met in the near future, since most people do not earn a fraction of the money needed for the proclaimed "good life".

It is mostly to this factor that I would attribute the looting of shops and factories in Mdantsane and not to the much cited

"criminal element".

With regard to the seemingly irrational burning of factories and the resultant destruction of thousands of jobs, it is important to look briefly at the nature of the industrialisation that took place in the Ciskei.

The establishment of industries in this region took place in terms of the South African government's policy of decentralisation which in turn should be seen in conjunction with apartheid and the government's homeland and anti-black urbanisation policy.

In order to lure industrialists away from their normal urban settings, a very attractive package was designed, eventually consisting of various forms of low-interest loans, subsidies and tax concessions. The fact that trade unions are outlawed in all the bantustans and that a monthly subsidy of R120 was paid towards the wage of every worker, made the opportunity even more enticing.

Rumours are rife in East London that many industries add nothing to that subsidy, while others do not even go that far and pay a monthly wage of only R60 and pocket the rest. Rumour also has it that some really big name companies pay about a tenth of the union wage they pay in East London to workers in their subsidiary companies in Mdantsane or Dimbaza.

If one heeds the rumour that "close connections" to Sebe were an "informal requirement" for the acquisition of an indus-

try, it all becomes more understandable that people destroyed the very factories that gave them work. They were seen as symbols of the hated system.

A final point made by Mluleki George at the meeting, is the disruptive effect the states of emergency had on the work and organisation of MDM structures. He felt that if, for example, a well organised system of street committees had existed at the time of the outbreak of violence (as was the case before 1986), the whole situation would not have occurred since the preventative action would have been taken.

It is probably necessary to delve deeper into the "culture of violence" in South Africa – especially in the light of other recent occurrences of violence. It is also necessary to look further into the role of the youth and their political and material expectations – but I prefer to leave that to people who know more.

I will conclude by asking, along with Francis Wilson: "Can we as whites, responsible for the violence of the migrant labour system and the other oppressive structures in our history, point at others? Should we not first remove the beam in our own eye?"

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