

SADF in townships: PLAYER OR REFEREE?

THE South African Defence Force was committed to the Natal townships recently at a time when the rest of the country was continuing the call for their removal as a step in setting the climate for negotiations.

In addition to an extensive call-up of citizen force and commando members, national servicemen, the Cape Corps and 32 Battalion have been deployed under the control of the police to assist in reducing the devastating violence.

This deployment occurred despite the government's reluctance to commit troops to the townships in the face of numerous calls from township residents for the SADF to replace the police as the primary peacekeeping force.

In Natal, after nine years of conflict and more than 3 000 deaths, the role of the SADF as a peacekeeping force seemed to be gaining momentum.

In May 1986, 10 of the more than 200 people killed by political violence were from the areas around Pietermaritzburg. By September 1987 the position had been completely reversed. By December, the deaths around the Pietermaritzburg area accounted for about 90 percent of all deaths caused by political conflict in South Africa.

At the height of the violence in 1987, women from Ashdown marched into the centre of Pietermaritzburg and requested the SADF to enter the townships to protect them.

Their call was for protection from the kwaZulu police and vigilantes who were allegedly responsible for most of the violence and deaths. It was the first of many calls by communities for the SADF to assist in bringing peace to the townships in Natal.

In December 1989, as part of a local peace agreement, the SADF was requested to enter Mpumalanga near Hammarsdale - a township where there had been substantial and continuing violence. Both teams representing Inkatha, the UDF and Cosatu felt that the SADF would be able to play an im-

Contrary to the general condemnation of troops in the townships, the SADF presence in some of Natal's troubled spots has been condoned and even welcomed. However, complaints about the conduct of the latest consignment of soldiers have been increasing. Staff of the Community Conflict Monitoring Service assess the prospects for the SADF to act as peacekeepers.

partial role in bringing peace to the embattled township where allegations of collusion by riot units of the SA Police were rife.

The result of the deployment of troops was that for nine consistent weeks the township slept peacefully.

The two main reasons given by residents when asked by monitors why the SADF had brought peace were that the SAP had left the area and that the troops were Zulu-speaking soldiers from 121 Battalion.

This second reason is surprisingly even more contentious. The explanation given by residents of Mpumalanga is that members of 121 Battalion were willing to, and could, communicate with them. This meant that the SADF was able to isolate the troublemakers by getting information from many sources and were given the leeway to act. Chief Minister Dr Buthelezi would later claim that 121 Battalion had been infiltrated by the UDF and the SAP would insist that all patrols were accompanied by a police officer - but in Mpumalanga at least, the presence of the SADF coincided with the most peaceful period of the past year.

AFTER nine weeks 121 Battalion left the area, despite community requests for them to remain. Within hours of their departure the war began again and Mpumalanga remains a divided township with areas clearly demarcated as "Inkatha" or "UDF".

Daily calls by residents to Democratic Party and Idasa monitors are another indicator of the communities' perception that the SADF has the ability to be impartial and effective in reducing violence.

The possibility for the SADF to be a refe-

ree rather than a player in the conflict was acknowledged by the End Conscription Campaign, which had always been opposed to their presence in the townships.

The ECC said that if the troops were properly supervised, they would not oppose the deployment in Natal. However they are still concerned that such deployment needs to be monitored.

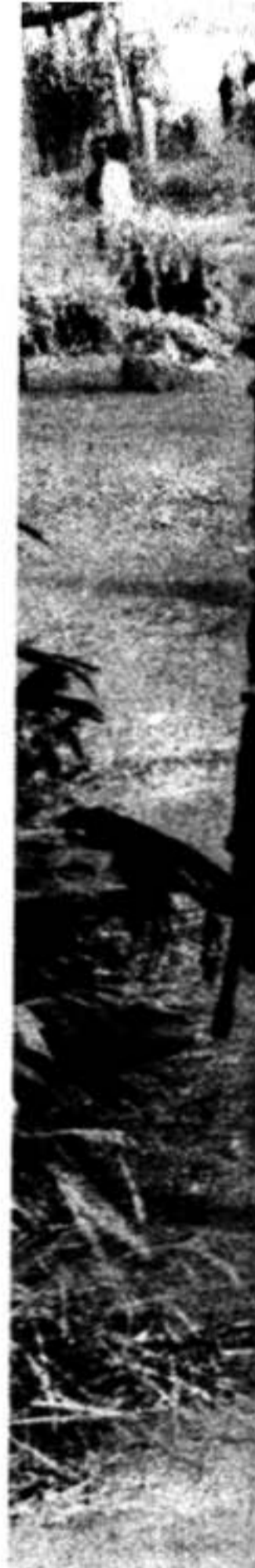
After the March invasion by Inkatha into townships and communities in the Edendale valley, State President FW de Klerk announced a series of measures aimed at bringing a swift halt to the violence in Natal.

Using the already established fund for development, part of which is to go to a Natal marked by drastic rural and urban poverty, a relief package was worked out. With it were to come 3 000 soldiers who were to play an important role in assisting the police in bringing peace to the province.

But the first public signs of concern were already emerging. The Chief Minister of kwaZulu reacted to the presence of troops in the Natal townships. Saying that black soldiers should "voetsak out of the townships", he claimed that their ranks had been infiltrated by the ANC. His call was given weight by the fact that two berets had been found at the scene of a particularly brutal attack on an Inkatha member's kraal.

Within a week of his call, 121 Battalion had left the township.

The deployment of alternative troops has raised problems also on the other side. Most reaction has come from the arrival of two battalions - 32 Battalion and 61



A mem



2 Battalion in the Greytown area near Pietermaritzburg.

picture: CLINT ZASMAN

Mechanised Infantry Battalion – both with reputations from the Namibia/Angolan conflict.

32 Battalion, which is made up of Namibian and Angolan defectors, is known for its effectiveness in the "Border" war, as well as for allegations of excessive brutality in the handling of prisoners.

This reputation has preceded them and made it impossible for local ANC supporters to see them in an impartial role. In addition they are unable to speak any of the local languages, being primarily Portuguese speaking.

WHEN organisations heard of plans to bring these troops into Natal they raised their concern with the authorities. In response they got an official denial that this would happen. The denial was publicised widely in the press and on SABC. Less than three days later, 32 Battalion arrived without any explanation.

beatings, theft and the rape of several women by members of 32 Battalion.

Many residents in kwaMashu are now saying that they don't want the SADF if this is how they are going to act. This turn around is a marked one and in sharp contrast to the mood in February when residents gave troops flowers.

The rapid movement of the conflict into the rural areas of Natal – a trend predicted by conflict monitors in 1989 – has been substantially proven. In attempts to either consolidate support for traditional chiefs linked to Inkatha or to ensure that there is no threat to this by dissidents in the area, incidents of violence have been recorded over Natal. At the time of writing, there was festering conflict in the Port Shepstone area, Ndwedwe, Isithebe, and Esikhaweni.

Monitors have heard reports of people being asked to join Inkatha or suffer the consequences. Rural residents explain these "consequences" as including attacks on

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The effects of this SADF presence is being felt in several ways.

In the urban areas, which have seen the heaviest fighting, there has been a decline in the number of incidents. However, it is only a relative decline when compared to March and April this year which produced the highest monthly death tolls of the conflict.

In addition, their presence has returned a measure of outside confidence and enabled people to focus on other things.

However, reports are starting to appear about disorderly conduct by members of the SADF.

In kwaMashu outside Durban, several people were allegedly badly assaulted by members of the Cape Corps. One man had to be hospitalised for seven days after receiving emergency surgery. In Inanda Newtown, there have been reports of

kraals, kidnappings and murders.

Inkatha regularly claims that UDF youth have threatened the authority and safety of some chiefs – and the conflict is complicated by layers of traditional rivalries and power struggles.

Stories circulate of SADF arms raids followed by attacks from the men of the area. Allegations have been made that SADF troops have been allocated to the chiefs for protection. These perceptions are strong and make it difficult for rural people to accept the SADF as impartial.

It is incidents such as these that convince the Democratic Party's Roy Ainsley that the SADF remains an apartheid army.

Warning that there could be a violent response from the community directed towards the SADF if there was not a change in the attitude of troops on the ground, Ainsley feels that "senior members of the SADF do recognise the need for them to play an impartial peacekeeping role. The problem is that there appears to be a communication breakdown between the top level and the lower echelons."

Organisations like the Joint Working Committee (JWC) of the UDF and Cosatu continue to demand that the security forces conduct themselves impartially if they want to be peacekeepers. For them the government is crucial in bringing an end to the violence and therefore the role of the SADF is key in any attempt made by the Nationalist Party.

IN A conflict resolution workshop conducted recently and attended by participants with links to both parties, a clear assessment of the expectations of community members towards peacekeeping was made. Among these were the need for impartiality, good communication and negotiating standards and scope of operation.

None of these matters have been subjects of negotiation, although communication has been set up between the security forces and the parties over the last few months.

The ANC would like to see a completely neutral peace-keeping force in place. As an alternative to this, they suggest a combination of security forces and Umkhonto we'Sizwe soldiers.

On the other side, Inkatha has called for greater policing and the removal of local black troops.

The government is committed to using the existing security forces to keep the peace and so the SADF will continue to be a major supplier of resources and expertise. Whether they will survive as referees, or become players as compromised as any other in Natal, will depend on whether they rise above their present practice and perceptions and conduct themselves as peacekeepers rather than auxiliaries to one of the parties.

CCMS is a project of Idasa.