

Saying no to apartheid's army

By Laura Pollecutt

Conscription is an issue which unites most women regardless of their status: they are the mothers, wives, girlfriends and sisters of white men who are forced by law to serve in the South African Defence Force. A recent meeting of the Johannesburg-based Idasa forum, Women Facing The Future Together focused on conscription and provided the 125 women who attended with three speakers from diverse but equally affected backgrounds. One of them has a son currently serving a six-year sentence for refusing to serve in the SADF because of his Christian principles; the second has served in the SADF as a commissioned officer and has since refused to continue participating in the system; and the third has lived as a victim of apartheid all her life and has experienced the SADF personally. Their contributions raised some burning issues.

Judy Bester, mother of Charles Bester sentenced in December to six years' imprisonment in a criminal jail, describes her family as typically middle-class white South Africans. She told the forum how she and her husband had had to work hard to provide the type of home and education she wanted for her children. Until recently she had felt "smug" about the family's achievements. Then came what she referred to as the "knockout blow" — Charles' decision to refuse his military call-up.

Recalling her emotions at the time of her son's sentencing, Judy said, "It was like being punched in the solar plexus. All the breath of life was knocked clean out of us, and it was the hardest thing in the world to pick ourselves up and carry on with life with some semblance of normality. The worst moment of my life was seeing our much loved teenage son being hauled out of the dock and hustled down to the cells by two burly policemen after he had put up a spirited defence against the might of the state."

Judy said many had questioned Charles' decision, some even going so far as to suggest "sinister forces bent on undermining the internal security of the state" had manipulated him. However, after providing a very clear picture of Charles' background and his deep Christian commitment, it was obvious that he had reached his own conclusions. "He wanted no part in the defence of a system based on discriminatory practices, one which denies human dignity rather than affirming it. He concluded that the SADF's role in the townships was not one of the impartial defender and protector, but (that the SADF) has become in some measure the tool of oppression."

André Zaïman, the next speaker who is also Idasa's regional director in Pretoria, proved that conscientious objection was not the preserve of the young and uninitiated. André, who as an Afrikaner dissident has had a painful and often lonely journey, served in the SADF and fought in Namibia. Since the completion of his national service he has resigned his commission as officer and refused to do the required reserve duty



SADF role questioned . . . Judy Bester and Sister Bernard Ncube.

or camps. André traced Afrikaner history to explain what he believes objection really is and means.

He referred to 2 March 1915, when Boer leader General J B M Hertzog was asked in

Parliament why he never spoke out against the Boer generals who in 1914 refused to be conscripted into the Union Army in order to invade South West Africa. The general's reply indicated that had he spoken out in favour of the generals he and many others would have been in jail. However, had he said what the government had wanted him to say he would have been a political prostitute.

"I am not a political prostitute," André said. "Objection confronted me with this choice because it is an act of value definition, of setting unambiguous parameters for your morality; an act of saying this I will do and this I won't. In objecting one rejects certain things; in this case the right of an illegitimate state to conscript you and consequently force you to defend a system that is indefensible."

Apart from believing that objection is a

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Mense in Suid-Afrika word deur sekere moeilike morele keuses gekonfronteer. Die weiering van jong blanke mans om in die Suid-Afrikaanse Weermag te dien is 'n poging om dié dimensie van die morele keuse weer aan wit Suid-Afrikaners voor te hou, sê Andries du Toit, een van die 771 mans wat onlangs geweier het om in die Suid-Afrikaanse Weermag te dien.

"Dienspligweieraars soos David Bruce (wat tans sy ses jaar tronkstraf uitdien vir sy weiering om in die SAW te dien) probeer om mense te inspireer om wel hierdie klein keusetjies te maak. En as Suid-Afrikaners begin om dié keuses te maak, mag hulle dalk weer begin trots voel om wit Suid-Afrikaners te wees," sê hy.

Andries, wat sy voorgraadse studie op Stellenbosch voltooi het, werk tans aan 'n meestersgraad in politieke wetenskap by die Universiteit van Kaapstad en kon tot dusver nog sy dienspligverpligtinge uitstel. By die voltooiing van sy Meestersgraad kan hy egter wel opgeroep word en dalk tot ses jaar tronkstraf gevonniss word. Nogtans twyfel hy nie daaraan dat hy die regte keuse gemaak het nie.

Hy was reeds deel van die eerste groep van 23 jong mans wat in Augustus 1987 bekend gemaak het dat hulle weier om in die SAW te dien. Vandag erken hy egter dat hy in 1987 nie werklik gereed was om die gevolge van sy besluit te kan verwerk nie. "Maar ek het met 'n mate van roekeloosheid en desperaatheid by my besluit gebly voordat ek uiteindelik besef het dat ek wel bereid sou wees om die gevolge van my besluit te hanteer."

"Voordat ek die keuse gemaak het, kon ek nie oor die toekoms dink nie. Ek het van jaar

tot jaar gelewe en die toekoms was net 'n grys wolk waarvoor ek nie wou dink nie. Nadat ek besluit het om nie in die SAW te dien nie, kon ek weer met hoop oor die toekoms in Suid-Afrika begin dink. Nou kan ek deur die Karoo verby dorpie soos Merwe-

ville ry en met redelike sekerheid weet dat ek oor 40 jaar nog steeds hier gaan wees om dié dinge te ervaar."

Dat hy die keuse téén diensplig sou maak, sou vir die meeste bewaarders van volk en vaderland seker nie te verbasend wees nie. Andries kom uit 'n liberale familie — sy pa, prof André du Toit, is onder andere 'n direkteur van Idasa — en hy was op skool nooit baie entoesiasies oor kadette en die weermag nie. "Ek kon myself nooit

met die fascisme van die kadette assosieer nie. Nogtans het diensplig vir my onafwendbaar gelyk en het dit nooit by my opgekom dat ek keuses daarvoor kan maak nie."

Op die ouderdom van 16 het hy egter 'n jaar in die VSA deurgebring wat sy uitkyk op die lewe heeltemal verander het. "Ek is gekonfronteer deur 'n skool wat nie gekenmerk is deur die lomp en kinderagtige fascisme van my ou skool Paul Roos nie. Ons is as grootmense behandel en daar is verag dat mens soos grootmens sou optree. Daar was ook intense debatte oor die morele kwessies van die dag. Daar het ek besef dat mens wel oor dié kwessies keuses kan maak."

"Dit klink nou bietjie dramaties, maar ek het Amerika toe gegaan as iemand wat teen apartheid gekant is en teruggekom as iemand wat homself met die struggle van die gewone mense van Suid-Afrika identifiseer."

Hy sê dat die militarisering van ons samelewing hom geweldig getref het met sy terug-

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Andries du Toit

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value definition, André also believes it is an act of defiance. Just as all conscripts share a collective responsibility for the terrible crimes of apartheid, there is also a tremendous power and potential that is locked up in our collective defiance to obey unjust laws. This, André believes, is the way to wrestle control over our lives from the state.

He says, "Objection is also a demonstration of the commitment and resolve of white South Africans to fight repression and oppression no matter what the costs. It is the demonstration of our realisation that building a better future implies sacrifices, of our willingness to do so, and of our belief that a more just society is in fact possible. With this act of

civil disobedience we strengthen and nurture the growth of a democratic political culture . . . and we contribute towards the suffocation of authoritarianism that has become the hallmark of our society."

The authoritarianism of the state and the callous behaviour of the SADF were confirmed by Sister Bernard Ncube who was able to speak from firsthand experience. Currently the president of the Federation of Transvaal Women, Sister Bernard is a member of the Companions of the Catholic Order, has taught extensively, and has completed a diploma in theology. She has been in detention several times but the last time was for 16 months, 13 of which were spent in solitary confinement.

After giving a brief history of the entrance of the army into the townships in 1984, Sister Bernard gave a detailed and personalised

account of the SADF's invasion of Kagiso, a township outside Krugersdorp in the Transvaal.

"The army invaded every street, house and school. We were unprepared and felt traumatised and confused. It was like a whirlwind with young children calling you for someone who had been beaten up or shot and we did not know how to handle the situation. At night children would come looking for accommodation, parents would be seeking children and often they would be found in hospital.

"Then I dared to say I would phone parliament and in fact spoke to Leon Wessels who was the MP for the area. I tried to explain who I was and told him that there had already been eight deaths in two weeks. I asked him to do something for us, I pleaded with the magistrate to help stop this brutality."

Before a report could be done and sent to Cape Town, more deaths occurred and Sister Bernard and the community decided to launch an interdict against the brutality of the SADF. Judge Goldstein was prevented from hearing the interdict and a local investigation was stopped before the defence was finished. This was mainly because Sister Bernard and her colleagues were locked up. Six months later efforts to sue the government for injuries inflicted by the defence force (some people are in wheelchairs as a result of SADF action), the community were told that the interdict could not be received and all claims were stopped.

All this, Sister Bernard says, has not affected the beliefs of the young lions who she says are still highly spirited and resisting every time. She concluded with a plea to all mothers to say "no" to the brutality of apartheid before the loss of respect for life permeates our lives.

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keer. Sy romantiese identifikasie met die struggle het die kwessie van diensplig ook meer onmiddelik gemaak. "Ek is gevul met vrees en afsku oor die moontlikheid dat ek as 'n lid van die SAW dalk iemand sou moes doodmaak of dalk self doodgemaak sou kon word vir waardes waarteen ek hart en siel gekant was."

Dit was egter eers in 1987 dat hy finaal besluit het om 'n dienspligweieraar te word. "Op UCT was ek nie by al die protesoptogte betrokke nie. Ek het op die rand gestaan en maar my gang gegaan. Nogtans was ek by ander mense en organisasies betrokke en twee van my kenisse is in daardie tydperk in terme van Artikel 29 van die Strafproseswet in aanhouding geneem."

Andries sê dat die konfrontasie met die brutaliteit van die sisteem hom al hoe meer laat besef het dat mens keuse in Suid-Afrika

moet maak. "Met Ashley Kriel se begrafnis het ek ook besef watter grimmige en gewelddadige plek Suid-Afrika is en watter offerings mense moet maak wat in die struggle is. Ek het besef dat Suid-Afrika 'n land van doringdraad en traangas geword het."

Dit is in dié konteks dat hy kort daarna besluit het om deel van die groep van 23 jong mans te word wie se verklaring so 'n opskudding by die generaals veroorsaak het. Dit gaan vir hom dus oor meer as net 'n beswaar teen die SAW. "'n Mens moet 'n keuse maak of jy deel wil word van die stryd en skouer aan skouer vir bevryding wil veg met al die gewone mense van Suid-Afrika en of jy jou lot by die klein kliek van Juppies en tegnokrate wil ingooi," sê Andries.

"Baie mense probeer om die realiteite te ignoreer en vergryp hulself aan drank of dagga, aan CD-spelers en duur motors, maar so sit 'n mens net tralies om jou bestaan. As jy egter 'n keuse maak om vir vryheid te veg, kan jy jouself in die proses ook bevry."

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London with a renewed desire to do something to get people from different cultures together so that a better understanding of our situation can develop.

After meeting a deputy principal of St Matthews High School in Ciskei at a teachers' event arranged by the Independent Teachers' Centre in East London, we arranged to have a workshop involving pupils from our schools in a cultural exchange situation.

On a Saturday in March about 50 pupils from St Matthews High (a girls' school) joined a number of our girls, plus a couple of brave boys, for a workshop that was planned jointly by our English and pastoral departments. Group discussions were held on a variety of topics including the relevancy of school, strengths and weaknesses, greatest leaders and post-school plans.

The discussions were cautious at first, but after some ice breaker activities they livened up. Feedback from our white pupils included amazement at the clear objectives and goals that black pupils seemed to have. They were also surprised at the historical and general knowledge that these pupils had.

Those of us who were privileged to have a part in this event went away with a greater hope for the future because there existed among these young people a genuine desire to get to know each other better. Since the

workshop some of the pupils have been corresponding.

Johan Smulders
East London

(letter shortened)

Socialism not the cure

I have read with great interest your publication and I have closely followed the political developments within South Africa. A recent comment in your publication by Murphy Morobe of the Mass Democratic Movement disturbed me. Mr Morobe called for state intervention into the economy and said he doesn't rule out "some form of nationalisation". In other words to cure the problem of state intervention into the economy (via apartheid laws) he proposes further state intervention. It seems he should be proposing state deregulation.

Throughout the world people are learning how socialism (nationalisation) destroys prosperity. Instead of redistributing the wealth it only succeeds in redistributing the poverty. Instead of making the poor rich it only manages to make the rich poor, with one exception — those agents of the government in charge of the redistribution.

Laws which restrict economic freedom on the basis of race must be repealed but it is the height of absurdity to replace those with

other laws that also restrict economic freedom. The answer to repression is freedom, not repression, and when the MDM learns that, all of South Africa will be better off.

J Peron
San Francisco

(letter shortened)

Bridge building

The executive and members of the Isnembe Social League (ISL) would like to extend their sincere thanks and appreciation to Idasa for funding and making possible the successful programme held at the Umgababa Holiday Resort on 23 September.

The Isnembe Social League was not able to fund such a programme although members were eager to participate in a bridge building exercise of this nature.

Idasa has been instrumental in promoting good relations between the various races and this exercise was ample proof of it. The youth have certainly learnt a lot about the basics of life, and the barriers that are preventing progress at present.

We hope that Idasa continues in this spirit, and may God give you all the courage and energy to continue your work.

Sanjay Maharaj
ISL President
Tonga

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