

Mirror, mirror, off the wall?

The perception that violent crime directed against white people is out of control in the Transkei does not reflect a factual situation, but one constructed by the media, argues ZOLA SONDLLO.

THE PERCEPTION of Transkei as a hotbed of racist criminals has its roots in the Goldstone Commission finding that the homeland was being used by Apla, armed wing of the PAC, as a springboard for attacks on members of the South African Police and South African Defence Force and white civilians in South Africa.

This soured relations between Transkei and the rest of South Africa and, as a result, SADF troops set up posts on all roads leading to Transkei "to protect South African citizens from cross-border attacks". Transkei military ruler Bantu Holomisa then put his troops on alert, ordered road-blocks set up throughout the homeland, and a war of words ensued.

The South African Embassy in Transkei warned travellers and tourists to avoid Transkei if possible and cautioned those who did visit the area. The media were alerted and the East London-based *Daily Dispatch* responded particularly vociferously, its Umtata Bureau invoking and reproducing prevailing conceptions of the wave of "racist crimes" committed in the Transkei.

Sensational news headlines during the first week of the blockade emphasised the "seriousness of the situation". Certain crimes were highlighted as instances of the racist upsurge engulfing the homeland.

However, the supposed enormous increase in "racist crime" given splash coverage was not reflected in documented cases. The increase was constructed by the media. There was not a marked increase in incidents of crime; rather there was a marked increase in coverage of criminal incidents.

The opinions of people in the area shed light on the agenda-setting powers that the media wield. Letters from whites poured in to the *Daily Dispatch*. Some expressed fear and horror. Others, like the white woman whose letter was printed on 7 May, accused the South African Embassy of being trapped in a "laager mentality". She said that a major factor behind the warnings issued by the embassy was "white fear based on a distrust of black people".

After the lifting of the blockade, media coverage of apparently racist attacks decreased drastically. The media focus shifted elsewhere. This shift underlines the standardised practices of media institutions. It shows how they tend to construct particular realities, favouring certain societal interests above others.

It is fallacious to see media as passively reflecting the world. The media are active in the social construction of particular realities with particular social and political consequences.

In total, there have been 10 major incidents of violence in Transkei in the last 12 months. A brief glance at statistics on violence elsewhere in the country shows that Transkei is a haven of peace compared to many of the larger South African cities. Violence has engulfed the whole of South Africa and to single out one area, particularly one in which the incidence of violence is relatively low, is completely misleading.

Zola Sondlo is a freelance journalist based in Transkei.

'Violence has engulfed the whole of South Africa and to single out one area is quite misleading'



With Daniel Ortega: Mfundo Nkhulu, Faizel Ismail, Bo Petersen, Rob Davics, Laurie Nathan, Saleem Badat, Zenariah Barends.

Nicaragua: Dashed dreams and resilient hope

FAIZEL ISMAIL gives his impressions of a recent visit to Nicaragua by a team of Cape Town researchers.

AS WE approached Nicaragua from Miami, those of us who had been fellow travellers in the mass movements of the 1980s, recounted the hope, the excitement, and the inspiration that the revolution in Nicaragua in July 1979 had provided for a whole generation of young political activists in the early 1980s in South Africa.

No serious activist of the time did not read or discuss some aspect of the Sandinista struggle. Together with Vietnam, the experiences of the people of Nicaragua could be said to have been the leading influence that inspired the many mass organisations – students, community organisations, women's movements etc – that emerged in our country in the early 1980s.

I recounted too the shock, the distress and the dismay when on February 26, 1990 we heard Daniel Ortega announce over the radio that the Sandinistas had lost the elections. The defeat came after waves of protest and opposition in Eastern Europe brought down one socialist government after another in late 1989.

From the air, Managua, the capital, looked like a large village (despite a population of over one million) with no identifiable central area and hardly a building in sight that was more than two stories high. As we were driven through the city we could see the dilapidated buildings, ruined by both the earthquake of 1973 and the ravages of war.

The hotel in which we stayed was fairly modest, but cost \$60 per room per night (approximately R200). This is very steep by South African standards and about twice the price of the hotel in which we were to stay later in Rio de Janeiro.

The prices of most consumer goods that have a high import content (most consumer goods are increasingly being imported) were extremely high. Few people can afford to pay these prices.

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thus deepening the country's economic crises.

In a country of only 4,5 million people almost 900 000 are either unemployed or work in the informal sector. The minimum wage is about \$60 a month. Even the middle class has been severely affected – university lecturers earn about \$300 per month (less than R1 000). I was told about a medical doctor who has to work as a taxi driver part-time to supplement his income.

More than two thirds of the Nicaraguan economy is in the informal sector. People sell anything from fruit to car parts in the streets. Everything appears to be informal – dollars can be freely exchanged on the streets for cordobas (the Nicaraguan currency) at the black market rate. The streets are littered with dollairos (informal foreign exchange dealers).

And these are not the only things on sale on the streets – at night we observed hundreds of young girls barely in their teens selling sex to escape from poverty. Our Nicaraguan colleague explained that this phenomenon has only just sprung up since the new government came to power.

However, in the midst of the poverty there is a significant visibility of a monied class. They drive around in new American and Japanese cars and four-wheel drive vans brought in tax-free by returning exiles.

Nicaragua's economic problems lie both in the unequal balance of power in the global economy and the economic policies of the new Chamorro government. The declining terms of trade for its principal imports, its large debt repayments, and its reliance on foreign aid make it both vulnerable to the

major global powers (mainly the USA) and perpetuates its dependence on these powers. The pro-American Chamorro government began to implement the notorious structural adjustment programmes in an attempt to attract international aid and loans from USAID, the International Monetary Fund and World Bank.

These economic policies have caused great hardship among the majority of the people.

Having lost the election, the Sandinistas (FSLN) decided to form a complex alliance with the government to prevent the right wing from imposing its policies. Furthermore it recognised that the major global institutions would not direct much needed foreign resources into a country that is not stable. Nicaragua needed foreign exchange and the flow of foreign resources to rebuild the economy. The fact that the Sandinistas still had full control of the army, headed by Humberto Ortega (the brother of the former president), did not help to build US confidence in Nicaragua. The mainstream in the FSLN decided to maintain its alliance with the Chamorro government despite its tough economic policies.

The FSLN found itself having to support these economic policies, or at least not stand vigorously opposed. The devaluation of its currency, the reduction in social expenditure, the increase in interest rates and drastic reduction of the army from 80 000 to 15 000 by Humberto Ortega caused large scale unemployment. Public and private sector workers were retrenched, and the poor became poorer as their wage levels fell and prices increased.

The crisis has sparked a furious debate within the FSLN and has resulted in wide scale resistance. Workers, peasants and their trade unions which were formerly linked to

'Nicaragua's greatest hope is the will of its people to continue the struggle for human dignity'

the FSLN, declared their independence from the party and have been engaged in strikes against their employers. While we were in Managua over 300 retrenched sugar workers were camping outside the parliament building.

The party is divided between those who argue the importance of maintaining stability and keeping the right wing away from power and those who argue that the FSLN should become a real opposition party and break its alliance with the government.

Daniel Ortega, when we met him, was acutely aware of these contradictions. He argued that the FSLN could easily take political and military power. However, they would run the real risk of losing all the gains of the revolution and the United States would have the pretext to intervene directly, together with the right wing, and turn the country to civil war once again.

Ortega argued that the FSLN needed to strike a balance between maintaining its opposition to the policies of the government (by supporting the demands of the mass organisations) and maintaining stability in the country.

Caught in this myriad of contradictions, the society continues to struggle to survive, but there is some hope for the future in all this. Nicaragua's greatest hope is the persistent and unrelenting will of its people to continue the struggle for human dignity.

As we boarded the plane to return and I took one more glimpse at the city, the many smiling faces, new friendships and images of a wartorn country flashed by. I began to understand that although the Sandinistas lost the elections in February 1990, the army that defeated the pro-USA Somoza regime was still in power. Also, just as in Vietnam (where the United States still imposes a trade embargo and crippling economic sanctions), and in Cuba (which has been under a continuing US embargo since Fidel Castro overthrew the US-imposed dictatorship there in 1959), the US security establishment will not rest until they have defeated the Sandinistas. They never forgive or forget those who defeat them.

Faizel Ismail is co-ordinator of the UWC-Central American University Joint Project.

Fear is blinding us

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say I got over my culture shock.

I find it very problematic that there is so much fear about the violence, but there is every reason to be scared. The level of violence here is far beyond what I am used to.

The problem with the violence is that it separates people, and this is happening at a time when South Africans more than ever before need to be talking to each other and getting to know each other.

It is therefore a little frustrating to work for Idasa, which has as one of its aims to further contact between sections of the population. What is the use of it all when the "ordinary" white South African is sitting behind locked doors?

Another deeply frustrating feature is the apparently complete lack of concern on the part of most whites about the way the majority of black people are forced to live in squatter camps that are not worthy of animals. How can there be peace in this country when most people are not allowed to live a decent life? How is it possible to sleep peacefully in a good bed when one knows that less than 30 kilometres away hundreds of thousands of people live on a rubbish dump?

My first month in South Africa coincided with peace month, and there has been a lot of talk about peace. But talk is not enough to create peace. Unless South Africans start to take care of each other there will be no peace. There is still a very long way to go.

Henrik Poulsen is spending a traineeship at the Western Cape office of Idasa.