

Must SA bleed to death before the leaders act?



THE brutal massacre which took place at Boipatong and left 40 people dead, shocked a South Africa which had become numbed by endemic violence. Memorial services were held, strong commitments were made, assistance from the international community was sought, in order to start negotiations afresh and in the hope that this would bring an end to the sickening toll of violence.

Despite the pious commitment, the strong declarations, the new initiatives, South Africa continues to bleed. As this magazine goes to press, yet another human slaughter has occurred, this time in Ciskei.

Since Boipatong almost 1 000 people have died and at least 1 200 have been injured. The majority of the victims of violence are women and children.

The figures are chilling: 58 people died and 54 were injured in the PWV, Natal and the Western Cape between 26 August and 1 September alone. We are supposed to be encouraged when we read that the weekly death toll in the PWV area has dropped from an average of 54 from March to July to 25 in mid-August. In Natal, the weekly death rate has risen from 23 on average from March to July to 45 in mid-August.

Against this background, what are the political leaders in Natal saying? Chief Mangosutho Buthelezi is on record that "the ANC must be bugged up", and when Dr Mdlalose is challenged on television, he concedes that the statement was made but that it really meant that the ANC must be "bugged up" peacefully! Harry Gwala, a prominent ANC leader in Natal, is given a standing ovation by a large number of students at the University of Cape Town when he declares that "violence is not taking place in Natal. What is happening is a liberation war". In addition to that, he warns that the ANC may be forced to return to the "armed struggle".

Elsewhere, despite the fact that the PAC in recent weeks has been meeting with the government to seek common ground for negotiation, their spokesmen continue to emphasise that "the armed struggle" is part of the strategy to end apartheid. As preparations were made for the march on Ciskei, despite the volatile climate which exists there, ANC leaders were quoted as saying, "we are prepared to die in the attempt to secure freedom for our people". The question is, was the death count in Ciskei on September 7 really necessary? Is this the price the people must pay for freedom?

Meanwhile, despite all the protestations by the Minister of Law and Order, the overwhelming perception of blacks who are subject to violence almost every day of their lives, is that some elements in the police and security forces are playing a sinister role in the continuing violence. It hardly inspires confidence when deaths in custody continue at an ever-increasing rate.

Mindless violence is destroying the fabric of our society. Family life and communities are undermined. The economy limps on with no hope of recovery against the background of instability. Violence threatens to derail any possibility of genuine negotiations. Against this dismal scenario, what is being done to stop the violence?

The National Peace Accord under the indefatigable leadership of John Hall continues to hold meetings, to discuss strategies, to strengthen their forces. And whilst they meet and deliberate, people are dying. Monitoring agencies seek co-ordination, more teeth and whilst they monitor, people continue to die.

On the negotiation front, South Africans are told that it is impossible to restart formal negotiations because the government and the ANC cannot agree on the release of political prisoners and the ending of the violence! So while they talk about ending the violence and about the release of political prisoners, people die. Is it asking too much from the government and the ANC to appoint an independent arbitrator to resolve a matter such as the release of political prisoners which has been on the agenda for years?

It is well known that the causes of violence are legion and that the socio-economic situation of the majority of South Africans is a major cause. Nevertheless, it is clear that more and more lives are being lost in the ideological battle being fought between the ANC and Inkatha. The carnage taking place cries out for political and community leaders who are prepared to unambiguously condemn violence in word and deed. Must South Africa bleed to death for the want of political statesmen and women who can lead the country away from the path of confrontation to the new possibilities of genuine negotiations and above all, peace?

THERE is no certainty that any initiative is going to end the violence. All we can hope is for initiatives and men and women who will mount these initiatives so that violence is at least curtailed and controlled. Whilst we wait for negotiations to resume so that elections can be held and an interim government can be in place (which will enable co-ordinated action by a cross-section of political leadership to take decisive action against the perpetrators of violence), must we fold our arms and count our dead?

Surely the time is overdue for a high-level meeting, involving political leaders as well as civil society, to fashion a plan and a strategy to deal decisively with the death and destruction which is our daily diet in South Africa? It will be argued that the causes of violence and ways and means of countering violence have been discussed over and over again, but the fact of the matter is that violence continues and people are dying. If such a conference was called, not to attribute blame but to concede that all political parties carry responsibility for the violence and to find ways and means to work together, it may help to stop some of the killing. Such a conference would have to be called not by the government, nor the ANC or Inkatha or any other political party, but by an independent arbitrator.

Whatever else is true, the litany of violence demands action and in particular from those who are supposed to be exercising wise and mature political leadership.

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