

DEATH COMES IN GANGS



Wherever people organise, vigilante groups emerge carving a path of death and violence.

TIME AFTER TIME, vigilante violence has been linked to the interests of the community councillors often with their direct participation.

The rejection of community councils mean that they rely on force to impose their rule.

"The police, limited by law and by the publicity which inevitably follows extra-legal conduct, are unable to perform the function of terrorising groups and coercing consent to the ambitions of the community councillors," Haysom points out.

"The community councillors now associated with vigilantes have resorted to their private armies which they have either hoped or trusted would be sanctioned or tolerated by the authorities.

It seems they have not hoped in vain.

In January, a Supreme Court acknowledged for the first time that councillors were involved in violent vigilante actions, and were being protected by members of the SAP.

In this instance, three councillors were restrained from assaulting two children in Fort Beaufort, and Sgt. Sijika of Fort Beaufort Police Station was ordered to stop preventing assault complaints being made and from prejudicing investigations.

This was after Nowandle Mathe, the mother of an 11 year old boy, heard her child screaming next door. She saw three community councillors emerge from the house, and found her son lying on the floor bleeding from his stomach.

When she tried to report the matter, Sgt. Sijika prevented a junior policeman from taking the statement, and threatened to tell people she was working for the police if she took the issue further.

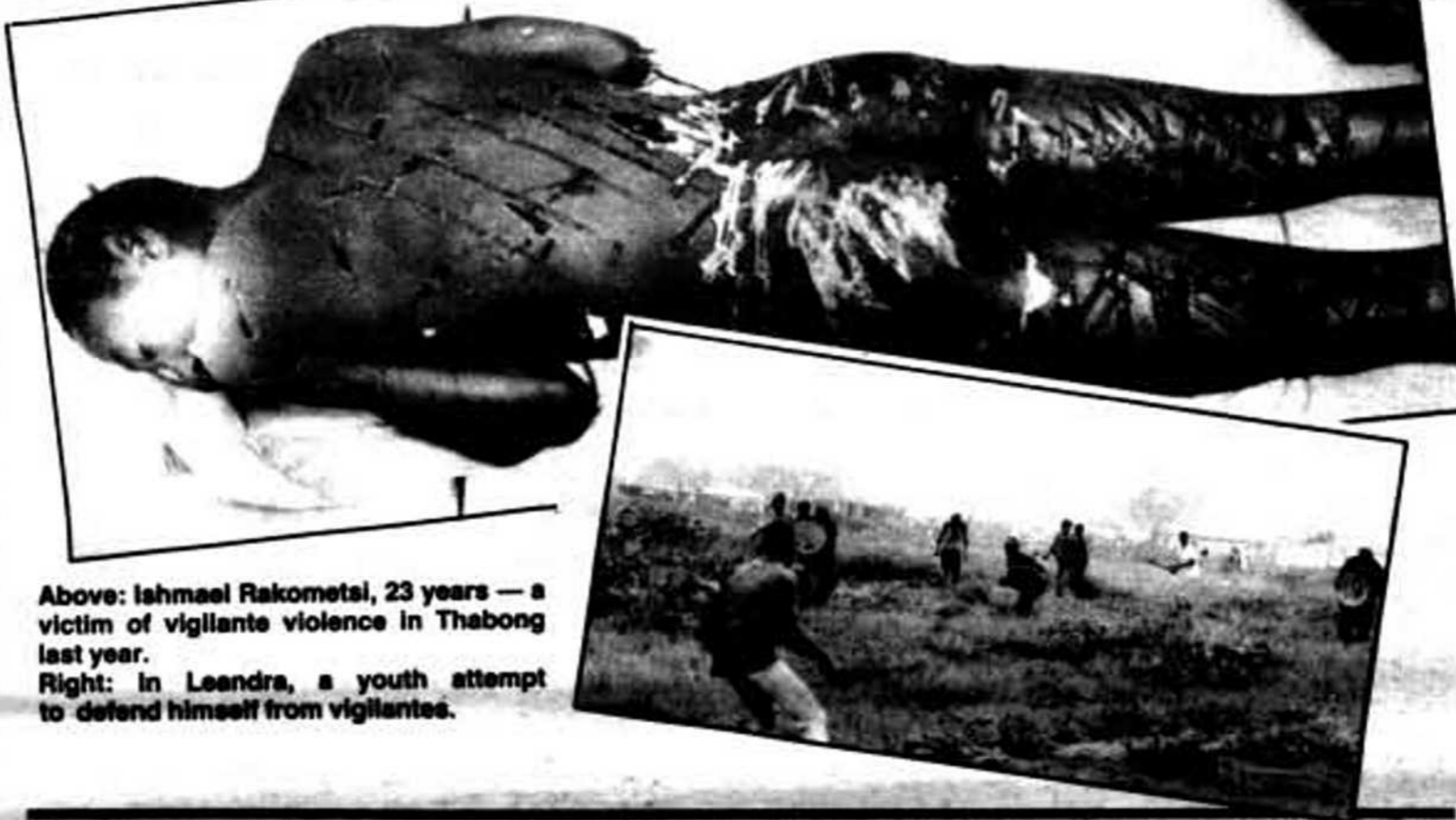
In Huhudi, the civic association (Huca) made enemies of the councillors by organising resistance to the forced removal of Huhudi into Bophutswana.

On 24 November last year, a group leaving a Huca meeting were allegedly attacked by vigilantes. They were taken into a shop owned by a community councillor, and assaulted.

Days later, the homes of two executive members of Huca were burnt to the ground. A youth who fled from one of the houses was hacked with pangas, and his body later found in the mortuary with three bullets in it.

Seven witnesses handed statements to the police, who told them to come back to sign them. But only three were allowed to sign their statements.

Since then, the assaults have con-



Above: Ishmael Rakometal, 23 years — a victim of vigilante violence in Thabong last year.

Right: In Leandra, a youth attempt to defend himself from vigilantes.

'Vigilante violence illegitimate'

"VIGILANTES ARE potentially murderous gangs, intent on intimidating, injuring or killing anti-apartheid activists. They are believed to enjoy police support and this is very often all that binds the A-Team, the Pakathis, the Maban-galala, the Amado, the Amosolomzi, the Amabutho, the Mabhokoto and the Green Berets," says Nicholas Haysom from the Wits Centre for Applied Legal Studies.

Haysom has recently completed a book examining the mushrooming of vigilante groups. He says "the term vigilante has a distinct meaning in South Africa. It does not mean a concerned citizen intent on preserving the safety of his family and decent values."

In Leandra Chief Mayisa hid in a disused truck while vigilantes burnt his house down. They found him and hacked him to death with axes and pangas. His mutilated body was taken to a scarpard where it was doused with petrol and burned.

In Thabong, Daniel Mabenyane (17) was taken by vigilantes from his home to the infamous room 29 of the council headquarters where he was flogged. Another man, also sjam-

bokked that night, recalled seeing Daniel Mabenyane on Sunday evening at the Thabong community council headquarters. "He had been assaulted and was bleeding from his buttocks. His trousers were down round his knees. His shirt was bloody. He was tired and could not speak".

The witness said that he, Daniel and one other were taken by the Phakathis to the police station, where "Daniel was left lying on the cement floor in the charge office behind the counter. He was still bleeding. He only spoke when he wanted water." Daniel was allegedly taken to the hospital at about 1500 hrs on Monday. He died there on Friday.

On November 25, in Huhudi near Vryburg, vigilantes allegedly attacked a group of youths. Sylvester "Mr Ref" Casebue (17) hid in a nearby house. A witness described how "vigilantes dragged Mr Ref from the house, beat him with spears and assegais, then fired two shots at point blank range, killing him."

In Tumabole the vigilantes are also

known as the A-Team. They allegedly cluster around a member of the local police force. They aim attacks at anti-apartheid activists.

In November 1985 the A-Team allegedly killed youth activists Lefu Rasago (17). They dragged him from a house and hacked him to death with garden implements, said witnesses.

"By the end of 1985, community leaders from regions as far afield as the Cape Peninsula and the Northern Transvaal were reporting right wing vigilantes. Although such groups can have specific regional characteristics, they do have common features. Their targets are members or leaders of anti-apartheid and anti-bantustan organisations.

"It can be no coincidence that vigilante activity emerged in 1985 as the political crisis in SA deepened.

"Vigilantes usually form in smaller townships and rural areas where progressive organisation has grown strong. They strike at organisations involved in challenging the real issues of removals, rents, schooling, transport and inadequate housing," says Haysom.

brings few guarantees of safety.

In Leandra, a shanty town in the Eastern Transvaal, the Leandra Action Committee has been fighting the threat of removal. Since December 1985, assaults on LAC leaders and threats to their supporters have mounted, and Bishop Nkoane appealed to both the Divisional Commissioner of Police and the Minister of Law and Order to intervene to stop this.

Chief Mayisa was hacked to death by vigilantes, who also called for the blood of Mr Nkabinde, Chair of the LAC, and burned down his house. At Mayisa's funeral, further violence broke out and hundreds of LAC supporters fled the area.

The LAC won an interdict in the Pretoria Supreme Court temporarily restraining 23 armed vigilantes from harming Leandra residents.

But the community has been torn apart and many LAC members, including about 300 women and children, have fled the area. The unity that characterised five years of resistance against removals has been shattered in two months of vigilante violence, and left the LAC badly crippled.

Vigilante groups aim to undermine unity, and look for weak links in the community.

In Leandra, 'insiders' with Section 10 rights and 'outsiders' with no urban rights were united in the face of removals. But the vigilantes have played on 'insider' resentment that confrontation with the police has arisen because of the LAC's defence of the rights of 'outsiders'.

"Where violence has erupted between different sections of the community, - there has often been strong evidence that division has been skillfully exploited or more openly encouraged by the authorities. It is claimed that in some areas the authorities have exploited the insecurities of one or other of these groups, or stood passively by when violence erupts, indicating at least to one group that their conduct will go unpunished," Haysom says.

At present, the formal incorporation of the vigilantes into the states law and order machinery is a serious trend. In Queenstown, many vigilantes have joined the Queenstown Commando. In Ashton and Thabong, vigilantes have applied to be Community Guards a form of municipal police under the community councils. The Minister of Constitutional Development and planning, Chris Heunis, has allocated money for 5 000 guards to be trained.

In many townships, defence against the vigilantes has become essential for the survival of activists and of organisation. But this defence is not easy.

Where the youth have gone into battle against the vigilantes, they have the advantage of community support on their side. But the vigilantes have the advantages of being well-armed, and the belief that they will not be touched by the law.

The effectiveness of court interdicts are still being tested, but working through the courts has certain limitations not least of which is that it is often a case of activists words against the councillors and police, and even if an interdict is won, the question remains as to how it can be enforced.

The more strongly organisation is rooted at a street level, the harder it seems to be for vigilantes to operate. Those townships where this level of organisation has been possible have been better able to curb vigilante action, and limit attempts at exploiting divisions.