

# NYANGA -

## A personal Perspective from June, 1982

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The Coloured Labour Preference Area policy for the Western Cape was originated in Dr Verwoerd's time. The area to the west of the "Eiselen Line" was to be reserved for Coloured labour, and all Africans living there were to be moved to the "independent nations" to be set up in the Eastern Cape. It was a weird dream that became a nightmare.

Whether the plan was to uplift Coloured people or to keep them down is debatable. Perhaps the point was not considered. In practice the policy has kept them down. Because poor people did not move in to take over poor jobs, no one moved up.

A side effect of the Verwoerdian policy, probably not foreseen at the time, is that many right-wing Whites now see the Western Cape as the last white outpost, with no Africans on this side of the Karroo and with the Coloured people given limited and separate political rights to prevent Coloured-African co-operation and to ensure a continuing labour supply in factories and farms.

The Western Cape is being made self-sufficient as regards industry, (nuclear) power, and food while many believe that the Cape sea-route (sic) will force international protection. As a result farmers and others from Namibia, Zimbabwe and the newly-created borders are moving to Cape Town and are causing a severe housing shortage among Whites.

While these pipe-dreams were developing, the local African people had to live, and there was (and is) a demand for their labour. Poverty in the Eastern Cape caused others to move here. Government records state that there are now 199600 Africans in Cape Town, of whom 114164 are "legal". The Black Sash believes that the total is closer to 250,000.

The "Influx Control" laws are enforced by Inspectors of the Peninsula Administration Board. This is regarded in the White community as the lowest form of employment, and the fact that the only Whites that many Africans come into contact with are these "Koornhof Inspectors" is a great hindrance to the prospects of future peace. The inspectors drive along bus routes arresting those whose "papers are not in order", and leaving as much bitterness among the "legals".

Because the African community was regarded as temporary no houses, schools, or hospitals had been built since 1969. The result is a terrible accommodation problem, and most black families have "illegal" lodgers (an average of 17 inhabitants per dwelling).

There is a severe pressure on African women in the Western Cape. Whereas 14% of all pass arrests occur in the Western Cape, 30% of all pass arrests of women occur here.

In terms of the CLPA policy, employers who satisfy officialdom that "suitable" Coloured labour is not available can be granted permits to employ African labour, generally for heavy manual work. These men may only be employed for a year, after which they must return to the "homelands" and apply there for another year's "Contract".

Businessmen regard these laws with contempt although Dr Koornhof, in his first months in his office, increased the fine for employing "illegal" Black labour from R100 to R500. Some employers hire an extra worker whose only job is to watch for inspectors.

The "Contract Workers", although almost all married, are housed in "Bachelor Quarters" administered by the Board. Reality demands that their wives and children be sheltered and the buildings erected for 20 men therefore often held 20 families. On 25 July 1980 Cape Town's Medical Officer of Health described hostels containing 6000 people as unfit for human habitation.

In July 1980 it was announced that housing would be provided for families. This was afterwards discovered to mean that 20 families would be evicted and the building converted to house 2 "legal" families. Pre-dawn pass raids started in March 1981. For the next few months hundreds were evicted, charged in Court, fined, and "repatriated", whereupon they promptly returned to the only home they had ever known. One group even hired the very bus in which they were "repatriated" and returned to Cape Town with it, to the great amusement of all Capetonians.

The Langa Court, in which the people appear, has been described by the Black Sash as "sausage machine justice". Women with crying babies are handled in a way that horrifies overseas visitors. During the Nyanga crisis a magistrate was reported as saying "People starve here, you can rather starve at home" and "I suppose you sleep with a different man every night."

In July, 1981 the pre-dawn raids increased in intensity. At 4 a.m. on July 16 1500 people were arrested. They agreed to refuse bail. Later in the morning 400 women walked to the Langa Court and sat on the lawn opposite the Court after asking to be arrested. Members of the Catholic Justice and Peace Commission arranged soup from a nearby convent.

At lunch time the Coloured policemen on duty were replaced by White policemen in riot uniform and the sitting women were ordered to disperse. I intervened and asked the Head of the Riot Police to withdraw the order as there would be no hostility if his men went home, whereas shooting tear gas at the women and children would provoke great anger. He refused and I telephoned the Cape Town police chief, asking him to send a more senior police officer. The riot police captain told the brigadier that the crowd was on the Court stoep.

I told the brigadier that that was untrue and that the magistrate could tell him the facts. I left the room and stayed outside for 30 minutes, until I decided that the dispersal order had lapsed, and then returned to my office. A reporter later told me that, as my car turned out of sight, the police fired tear gas at the women. The next morning the brigadier was reported as telling Die Burger newspaper that the people had threatened to storm the Court and free their friends.

When I denied this the brigadier told The Argus that "he advised Mr Bishop to leave police work to the professionals."

Thereafter the people moved onto a site between Crossroads and Nyanga, and erected shelters of bush and plastic. There then began a period of unbelievable savagery in the bitter cold and wet of the Cape Winter. There were constant raids in the course of which every bush was removed from the site.

A few highlights of those weeks are remembered particularly clearly.

A young woman suffered a miscarriage during a tear-gas raid and was taken to hospital by a Lutheran pastor. It took three days searching by her distraught husband before he found her.

One night an old lady was sitting in the rain in her bare feet. She had taken her shoes off to dry earlier in the day and an inspector had seen them during a raid, raced her to the shoes, got there first, and thrown them in the fire while laughing. The rule was that anything worn was considered as clothing, but anything not being worn at that moment was considered as "shelter" and destroyed.

A feature of the camp was the support from white and coloured Capetonians. Appeals for blankets and clothes drew such support that distribution became a problem. As winter progressed we appealed for firewood and on the same evening 30 tons was delivered by various people.

The boys of Christian Brothers College, Athlone, brought 2 packets of sandwiches to school every day – one for their lunch and one for the squatters. Each evening a group of teachers and scholars visited the camp with the food.

On one day of desperate food shortage a young white woman raced past the guards in her car and drove around the camp, scattering food from her car window while pursued by two Board vans. She was finally cornered and arrested but only after the food had been distributed.

About 50 families were taken in by non-black families and hidden as the family of Anne Frank were hidden. We took in one such family with two-year old twins. A nun had offered them a lift as they walked in pouring rain from the police cells but, having heard the dreadful coughing of the little girl, persuaded the parents not to go to the camp where they would have sat all night on a hillock with no shelter except 2 wet blankets and in conditions of bitter cold and driving rain.

It is hard to imagine that people could be so wet and cold, and it took fully two days of heaters and hot baths before they stopped shivering. The husband, not having a permit to work, seeks work as a casual gardener and succeeds mainly over weekends. Family income averages R20 per week. The family, like so many of the people from the No-Name camp, is Christian and held an hour-long family service of prayer and Bible reading each evening.

The father had always worked in Cape Town while the wife lived in the Transkei. Their eldest child died in the

Transkei in 1978 and the mother moved to Cape Town when the twin girl became ill in 1979. The child was hospitalised for six months for tuberculosis and was much smaller than her twin brother. When they came to us, both children had terrible coughs and diarrhoea. The little girl brought up a worm some 15 inches long.

Two weeks of warmth, food, shelter and medical attention caused a tremendous improvement in the health of both children. But on August 16th they heard that Dr Koornhof would distribute passes to those on the site next morning (shades of Dingaans and Retief), they therefore returned to the No-Name camp and were among those "resettled".

A few points should be clarified. The term "squatters" often refers overseas to people who won't work and who occupy empty houses and smoke pot. In South Africa the word is a dignified one that refers to people robbed of their birthright, and is used with pride.

The Black Sash conducted a survey of 540 camp adults. 91% had been in Cape Town for over two years and 66% for over five years. 94% of the men and 83% of the women had been in employment when the intensified harassment began.

After the intense drama of the No-Name camp, the squatters and the officials both seemed content to maintain a lower profile. The squatters boarded with legal residents or dispersed further into the bush. The inspectors continued their unsavoury work of stopping people and demanding their passes, while the Langa Court continued, with Black Sash members monitoring the proceedings. A small group of squatters moved to a sand dune near the former No-Name camp.

A bulldozer was sent to the site on the rather foolish mission of flattening the dune.

On March 9 54 squatters began a "sit-in" fast in St. Georges Cathedral. Dean Edward King had not been informed of their intention, and said that, although their stay created problems of logistics and security, he would certainly not ask them to leave the cathedral.

The squatters said in a statement: "We have committed no crime, but we and our wives and little children have had our houses pulled down in the cold and rain. We have been raided, gassed, beaten and deported to places we do not know. As Christian South Africans, we have come to the cathedral to fast and pray that God will send the Christian message to Dr Piet Koornhof, that he will allow us to live as Christian families in Cape Town. We know no place but Cape Town. It is our home."

The verger was concerned about right-wing vandalism and proposed that someone should stay with the squatters each night. I offered to stay for the first night but the experience was so inspiring, and the need to have some-one there so great, that I stayed with them every night until they vacated the cathedral on April 1.

After five days of absolute fasting, the adults agreed on medical advice to accept fruit juice and vitamins. The children were well fed, and benefited from nights under shelter and the absence of the morning terror of police raids.

The sores and worms that plagued them on the sand dunes were no more. Their initial fear of white men, developed in the pass raids, disappeared.

A pregnant woman suffered a miscarriage after three days brought on by stress. Two other pregnant women were

prevailed on by the community to eat. A committee member commented: "We did not come here to kill".

Days in the cathedral were occupied with visitors. Prominent South African visitors included Mrs Helen Suzman, Dr Nthato Motlana, the Rev. Peter Storey and Lutheran Bishop Serote of Venda. Radio, television and press journalists came from the United States, Canada, Germany, Britain, Norway, Australia and Hong Kong.

Only one journalist from a pro-government newspaper visited. She sought comment on two statements: "it is said that white people have organized this demonstration", and "it is said that the demonstration has been timed to coincide with the cricket tour."

Visiting churchmen of all denominations held services. About four times each day the group held a church service with hymns, prayers, and Bible readings. They attended all cathedral services including five on Sundays. The silence of the children during services attracted a great deal of comment.

Visitors left donations which were badly needed, as the vitamins cost R35 per day. One visitor donated 57 blankets, but these were not used during the fast, as the community decided that "we came here to sacrifice."

Parishioners rallied to distribute medicines. The St John's Ambulance Brigade maintained a medical vigil. Volunteers took the squatters to their homes for baths.

Not all visitors came in a spirit of goodwill. Stink bombs were let off, and fish heads thrown into the cathedral.

One woman hid in the cathedral before it was locked, and emerged at midnight to insult the community. It is a measure of their charity that they endured her for 15 minutes before waking me.

The next day a woman, possibly the same one, was found urinating beside an altar.

The cathedral is surrounded by the houses of parliament, the supreme court, a businessman's club, the provincial administration building and two large finance companies. One nevertheless felt that the real source of power and culture and worth came from the humble people inside the cathedral.

The Western Province Council of Churches pressed Dr Koornhof to meet the squatters and he agreed to do so if they left the cathedral. The squatters replied "We fear arrest if we leave the cathedral similar to what happened last year during our negotiations at the No-Name Camp. We are happy that he meets the Church leaders. As Christians we hope and pray that the discussions are fruitful."

After intense negotiations the squatters left the cathedral on April 1. Dr Koornhof agreed to investigate each case and make a decision by April 16, and to grant them immunity until then. By agreement they moved to Holy Cross Church in Nyanga.

Because the 54 fasters represented the Bush community they insisted that all 750 names be reviewed. This was ultimately agreed. A group of 150 squatters refused to

have their names included on the list as they claimed that Dr Koornhof was playing a cat and mouse game with the community. There is still bad feeling over the two viewpoints.

The immunity became subject to the whim of individual inspectors until the W P Council of Churches gave each squatter a signed document confirming that the bearer was included on the list of people whose cases were being reviewed.

On April 21 Mrs Annie Mnikina, 30, was arrested outside a friend's house while with her two children, aged 8 and 7. She was not allowed to fetch money from the house. When she asked about the two children who were screaming in terror the inspector said "Kom Kom" and pulled her by her clothes into the van. She was taken to Langa where, after 20 minutes of insisting that she was under immunity, her name was checked on the list and was told to go. She had to beg money from passers-by for bus-fare to Nyanga, where she found her children safe after being taken-in by a woman near where she was arrested.

The "sympathetic decision" due on April 16 has not yet arrived at the time of writing (June 10) although Parliament is due to prorogue in 2 day's time. The "Cathedral" squatters are still living in tents at Holy Cross Church while another 245 people are on the sand dune a kilometer away.

The winter cold and rains have started and the misery is approaching the level of last year. A letter from the Civil Rights League published in The Argus of June 9 said

"The community continues to be harassed with men being arrested at bus stops on their way to work.

A few weeks ago the women were close to despair after Dr Koornhof's inspectors entered the camp and drove an axe through every cooking pot.

It is typical of the mindless violence that future generations will judge to be a crime against humanity.

In desperation 54 squatters moved into St George's Cathedral and started a Lenten fast, a step that reflected the Christian commitment of the Nyanga community.

Dr Koornhof ultimately promised to reconsider their status provided they left the cathedral. The fasters agreed and returned to Nyanga on April 1, following an undertaking of resolution by April 16.

Many churchmen and civil rights workers were distrustful of the offer but it is not our role to give advice.

We were encouraged by the fact that Parliament was in session and the parliamentary Opposition knew the situation. Some 10 weeks have since elapsed and Parliament has devoted its energies to the irrelevance of Dr Treurnicht and the even greater irrelevance of the President's Council.

Parliament is due to rise this week and the politicians will disperse. Dr Koornhof has succeeded in playing for time, even though time is something our country does not have."□