

# THE RIOTS

## IN URBAN AFRICAN AREAS

An interview with a Soweto resident.

### A Black View.

- Interviewer: Can we begin talking about the events which took place in Soweto, Alexandra township and other African areas recently by asking what way they could best be described: were they riots, war, civil unrest or urban guerilla tactics? What do you think?
- R: I think "civil unrest" is the most suitable.
- Int: Why do you think that?
- R: Because it was a protest concerning the implementation of Afrikaans as a medium of instruction.
- Int: Why do you think the issue of Afrikaans brought all this to a head? I realise that people are living under appalling conditions, earning appalling wages, and have been restless, but it seems that the issue of education and Afrikaans brought the matter to a head.
- R: I believe that Afrikaans is quite a difficult language to master, to start with. Some of the teachers are not even efficient in communicating in Afrikaans, let alone teaching in it.
- Int: Why do you think it was the school-children who triggered the protest off? Do you think it significant that it was the younger people who made a stand?
- R: I believe that when Afrikaans was introduced some years back (I was talking to some students who were present when it was first introduced) a few subjects were introduced by means of Afrikaans. They didn't mind it then because it was more or less an interpretation of terms from English, direct interpretations into Afrikaans. But I think what brought this (unrest) up was that whole subjects, even Mathematics and Science had to be done in Afrikaans.
- Int: Did the teachers make any protests, or the parents?
- R: There was a bit of a grumble, but not to any (large extent).
- Int: Do you think the pupils took it into their own hands because the adults weren't doing anything about it?
- R: Yes, I think they felt they were let down by their elders and their teachers.
- Int: Does this suggest that younger people are more militant than the adults, over certain issues?
- R: Yes, I would say they are more militant.
- Int: Why do you think this is so?
- R: I think that the poor standard of so-called Bantu education has brought the whole thing off because they are quite aware that it is a lesser education... and to make matters worse has come the issue of Afrikaans.
- Int: Is it true to say that the pupils organised themselves without the assistance of teachers, that they left the teachers out of it?
- R: They didn't consult the teachers, they just organised themselves, according to my observation.
- Int: Does this suggest that there is a difference of opinion between teachers and the pupils? Do the teachers not approve of this sort of protest or are they caught by their position?
- R: I believe that they are caught by their position and that the students are quite aware that their teachers are rather helpless because there are what they call school boards which just bully teachers.
- Int: So teachers are in fact powerless, if they want to keep their jobs?
- R: I believe so.
- Int: Do you think that the pupils who began organising the protest did so for purely education reasons or was the protest linked to a larger issue?
- R: I think initially it was purely an educational issue.
- Int: And later on?
- R: And later on I think it spread to the other elements like the local thugs and the people who were concerned with the — who were dissatisfied with the conditions in the townships.
- Int: Do you think that any organisations were involved?
- R: I wouldn't rightly say there was actually any organisation involved, although I can't say precisely.
- Int: So this is why you would choose the term 'civil unrest'?
- R: Yes.
- Int: Because you feel that it came out of the community as such rather than from an organisation.
- R: That's what I feel.
- Int: Can we come now to those people who are speaking on behalf of the black communities with members of the government. Do you think that they are able to represent the true feelings of the communities they claim to represent?
- R: No, I don't think they have the right because I feel they are sort of, they are merely government hirelings, they are not chosen by the people and what they say doesn't represent the feelings of the community.
- Int: Have the recent events produced any people who are felt to be leaders of the community?
- R: There are some people whom the community was prepared to listen to, people who are involved in the

Parents' Association body. The students were actually listening to them, they were trying to warn them off, not to get out of hand.

Int: So they are trying to prevent the students from running unnecessary risks and endangering life and property any more than had already occurred?

R: Yes.

Int: Arising out of the issue of risks and danger, I would like to know what you think the role of the police has been in this unrest. There are people who feel that the presence of the police made the situation worse than it was and excited the temper of the people. What do you think of that?

R: In fact, from what I observed, I saw the students marching peacefully, although when I saw them first there was a large body of students coming from the schools further in Soweto, coming down our area: they were just marching peacefully. Until they got to the high school next to my area, then they started . . . in fact I think according to their arrangements they had to get all the students from all the schools to march with them. I do not safely say where their destination was but when they got to this particular school, the principal did not want his students to be involved: that's when the vanloads of police came. I don't know whether they were phoned or that they knew about what was happening but I think, according to my observation, the police really worsened the matter.

Int: Could you give some examples of what you saw?

R: What I saw was, the police came and they were trying to disrupt this march of the students.

Int: Disrupt in what sense? To send them home or to attack them?

R: Trying to quell them, I think, to disperse them a bit . . . that kind of thing.

Int: What methods did they use?

R: When they first came, they came in van-loads and the students started jeering at them and I think a few started throwing a few stones. And – well, I was far – I couldn't actually see – I only heard that one youngster was already shot and that was when the students really started pelting at the police vans. And the police started shooting blanks.

Int: One of the things that you said is that the original protest spread to other groups in the township. You said that it involved elements like local thugs and those who were dissatisfied with conditions in the townships. Many of the buildings that were burnt belonged, for example in Soweto, to the West Rand Board and it would seem that there was direct and clear political interest in attacking those buildings. Do you think that the looting of bottle-stores and so on has destroyed the political purpose or political gain of the unrest? Or the intention that it all started out with?

R: I think initially, when the students started, their intention was a sort of protest that liquor was the downfall of the urban blacks because wherever you go you come across a bottle-store, a beer-hall. Their intention was to do away with that kind of thing because they even wrote slogans like, "Better education and less liquor".

Int: They see these two issues as closely linked?

R: Yes – that is besides the looting and what eventually happened.

Int: In looking at the recent civil unrest, how do you think it compares with the events involving the shootings at Sharpeville?

R: I think the only similarity was in the uprising of the whole community, but as two issues, I see them differently.

Int: Can you say what those differences are?

R: I think that Sharpeville was rather an isolated affair compared to what happened recently.

Int: Do you see this unrest as something that is going to continue? From the way the communities feel, do you anticipate more of this, going on all the time?

R: I wouldn't say all the time, but what I have noticed, the people seem to be shocked after what happened, that they had this in them, this outburst, but I think it could happen again if something really disturbs them, like the students not going back to school after the schools are opened.

Int: To come back to the differences between the recent events and Sharpeville, which you said was more isolated. It has been suggested to me that this (the recent event) is essentially an urban feeling – the feeling of resistance. Have you any idea how widespread the current feeling is: is it more widespread than the cities, do you think?

R: On the whole, what actually made the community become involved was the adults being shamed by their children, and being aware that they've been letting their children down all round.

Int: Do you believe that this is felt on a country-wide basis?

R: Yes, I believe its quite a national thing – because even in the rural areas, the same feeling is already there that the adults have just been sitting down and not doing anything about the worsening situation.

Int: You say that people have been shocked to discover the violence that is in them, the actions that were taken in that crisis-situation that brought to the fore, actions that have left people somewhat shocked and surprised at themselves.

R: In fact, that's the impression I have in looking at the people after this whole thing.

Int: That seems to suggest that if the feelings are still there, if that shame on the part of the parents is still there, and, as you suggest, unless something is done it could happen again, is there any way in which this could be channelled into constructive or creative action? rather than to leave people feeling victims of their emotions?

R: I believe the only thing that if the system of the local heads could be changed, the nominations rather, if the people could really choose the people they felt could represent them, and they had faith in them, there could be a great change, and these people really met the government and not give any way as far as their demands were concerned, there could be change.

Int: This is not likely to happen, is it?

R: No, I don't believe it's likely to happen.

Int: Do you think that as a consequence of what has

happened, that there is any greater sensitivity on the part of the white community to the situation?

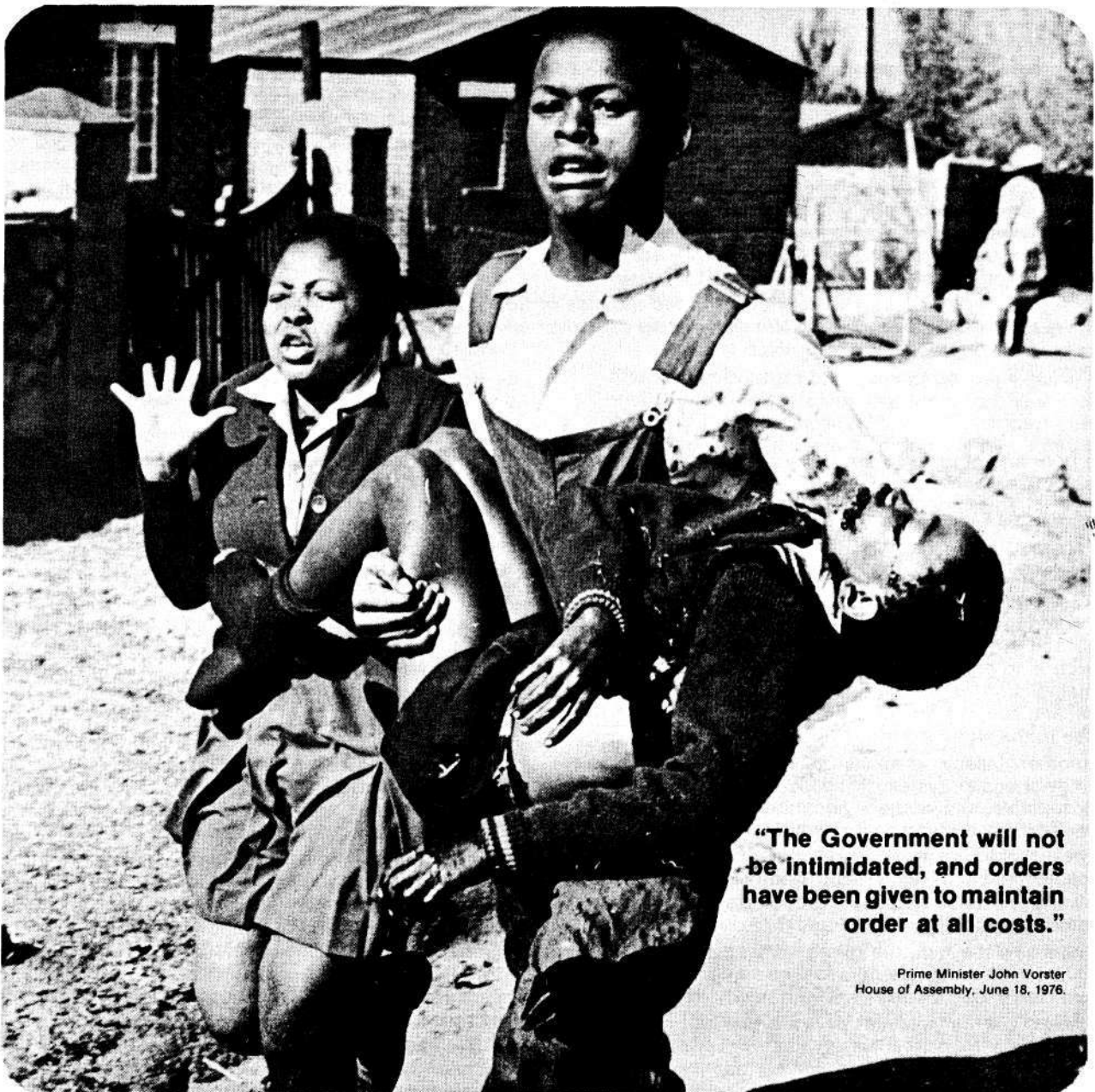
R: It varies. There are some whites who have always been aware of the tension that has been building up in the urban areas. And others couldn't just care.

Int: One of the sensations these recent events gave me was a sense of being more cut off from people than ever before. I have always felt that those people with whom I am friendly and who live in Alexandra township, in Soweto and in Tembisa, live far away from me. But when these townships were closed off then I felt that if these friends were in trouble, or if I were in trouble, I had no way of reaching them and they had no way of getting in touch with me. This made me feel the gap which was probably always there but I felt it more when these events took place than ever before. Is there now a sense among the black community that they are entirely on their own — or have they always felt like this?

R: I don't think they have always felt like this until during the riot period. They felt they could do without any white aid: but as I say, what I observed after the riots was that they were moving around like a sort of lost people, like a child who has done something wrong and does not know how to go about repairing that wrong.

Int: Why do you use the word 'wrong' — why do you think people feel a sense of wrong? Is it because they have destroyed property, because lives have been lost? Where do you think the guilt comes from?

R: I think the guilt comes from . . . how can I put it, not guilt, not actually guilt, I think fear . . . I think it is more a question of fear than guilt. Fear of being picked up by the police and being charged, thinking about the children, what would happen if the head of the family has to be arrested, because he was involved in the riot.



**"The Government will not be intimidated, and orders have been given to maintain order at all costs."**

Prime Minister John Vorster  
House of Assembly, June 18, 1976.

With acknowledgement to the WORLD

The Picture that went round the world.

Soweto June 1976.



- Int: The two major things that you suggest are the sense of fear on the part of the people as a consequence of what has come about, the violence of the people themselves and the violence of the police on the one hand, and the sense, that you feel exists on a national scale, of the adults having let the younger people down.
- R: Yes.
- Int: So that the adults are feeling fear and feeling inadequate, which underlines the point that you made earlier that if true leaders could emerge, this would help people a great deal to act constructively.
- R: Yes. Another factor is that when people look at the burnt buildings and the burnt-out cars that are spread all over the township, they ask themselves how all this is going to be paid for. Will it be at the people's expense?
- Int: Is there not a new mood of determination? I have heard some young people say that they have got to the point where they are prepared to give their lives . . .
- R: Yes, there's also this . . . the people are wondering how the West Rand Board is going to repair its losses. I think, if they could announce for instance, next month, that the rents are going up, there could be more havoc.
- Int: Presumably this affects many things . . . if Putco put up its bus fares, that could trigger off violence?
- R: Yes, I believe that at this stage it could. Because there is a general discontent as far as wages are concerned and the rising cost of living.
- Int: One of the things that I find myself wondering about is whether it's possible to guess what the general attitude of the black community is towards whites after this event. Are there significant numbers of people who feel that they could still continue to conceive of this country still being a place where whites and blacks could work together?
- R: Generally, there is more bitterness towards whites because, as it is, there are quite a few people who lost their jobs because they stayed away during the riots. Most of them are young people and they are very bitter about it.
- Int: A white doctor that I know, who works at Baragwanath Hospital, felt no personal hostility from the students: it seemed very clear in the minds of the people who were demonstrating what their aim was and exactly what they were going for. They were not motivated then by sheer hostility towards whites but that they had specific targets in view.
- R: Yes, I think the targets like they were attacking, bakeries and milk-vans . . .
- Int: Why those?
- R: Oh, I think those symbolise to them the people who have money, who were underpaying them . . .
- Int: And overcharging them?
- R: Overcharging them and still coming to get their money out of the township.
- Int: Why was it that blacks going into Soweto were being accosted when they were coming in with their cars, being obliged to pay for their entry?
- R: I think that was because the people who were in the township when this whole thing started thought of them as being tools of white industrialists . . . they didn't sacrifice a thing . . .
- Int: The very fact that they went off to their jobs, you mean, was held against them?
- R: Yes, I think those in the unrest felt that as soon as they got the news they should have left their jobs and come to the townships.
- Int: Was that the only sort of division that occurred amongst the people of Soweto: those who had to go off and earn their money and those who felt they should stay at home? There weren't any other factions that were at odds with each other, on a political basis, that you were aware of?
- R: No, I don't think so, on a political basis. Except where you found a group of won't-works who were actually demanding money from cars coming into the townships for their own use.
- Int: Were the gangsters exploiting the situation?
- R: Yes, they were.
- Int: What was the attitude of the general community towards those gangsters?
- R: The gangsters remained with the people who were emotionally concerned about the whole thing. So you couldn't just say, "I know you are not actually concerned with what is happening. Don't do what you are doing".
- Int: Is the promise of lights in Soweto going to make any difference?
- R: I don't think it's going to make any difference because it's been promised since . . .
- Int: Two points occur to me as you talk. The first is that it has been suggested that a number of people killed were informers. Does this ring true as far as you know? The implication is that these people were killed by the people of the townships in revenge.
- R: I wouldn't specifically say that is true.
- Int: The other point is that the police have alleged that a number of the people shot were hit by bullets with a calibre that the police don't ordinarily use.
- R: Yes, I read that statement.
- Int: Does it make sense to you?
- R: No, it doesn't.
- Int: As far as you are concerned, there were no guns in evidence among members of the black community?
- R: No. Personally I never saw any, although there could have been. I can't justify that. □