

Some conclusions on the Natal violence

(The final chapter of *An Unofficial War*, recently published by David Philip)

The government in its official pronouncements on the situation in Pietermaritzburg says either that everything is under control or that there is black-on-black violence taking place. This is a deceptive term coined by the government to diminish the importance of the protests in black townships around the country in 1984/5. Certain sectors of the media latched gratefully onto the phrase and even some foreign commentators were taken in by it. What is at best a dubious and flawed description is passed off as an explanation.

The term is used to reassure white South Africans that the fighting is merely part of the tribal legacy of the Zulu people and that whites need not concern themselves about it. In this way the government excuses itself from addressing the real political causes of the violence because it claims there are none, only intra-racial and ethnic lines of cleavage in which it need not interfere.

The government is not alone in insisting that the causes of the violence are not political. The Inkatha Institute, a sociological research institute based in Durban, has also found that political conflict, insofar as it exists, is merely a subsidiary, aggravating factor in the conflict. According to Gavin Woods, director of the Institute, the causes of the violence in Natal are socio-economic: high levels of unemployment among black youth in the region, together with poverty and general dissatisfaction with their lot and the lack of a rosy future leads black youth to express their anger through violence which is criminal rather than political.

This argument manages to combine stating the obvious and ignoring the blatantly obvious. Poverty, unemployment and alienated youth are not specific to Natal, whereas the political rivalry between Inkatha and UDF is.

Notwithstanding Woods' explanation, both Inkatha and the UDF perceive the political nature of the violence. According to Chief Buthelezi and Inkatha, the present war is simply the latest development in an ANC-orchestrated campaign to destroy the organisation. The UDF, by contrast, claims to be the victim of a joint strategy devised by Inkatha and the state to destroy all progressive organisations in Natal.

It is not surprising that two such incompatible political movements should fall into dispute. Although it adopts an anti-apartheid stance, Inkatha may be regarded as a strongly conservative organisation which relies on appeals to Zulu nationalism and pride. To create and maintain its constituency at mass rallies and on days of Zulu national celebrations, the Inkatha leadership puts on a spectacular which employs traditional symbolism and language which hearkens back to a nobler past.



The UDF, on the other hand, presents an aggressively modern image. Its largest support base is found in the urban townships, particularly among the youth, and its campaigns tend to focus on problems facing the urban black population. The UDF's avowed broad, supra-ethnic appeal directly opposes the supposedly narrow nationalist ethic of Inkatha. This challenge is recognised by Inkatha and many of the anti-UDF denunciations issued by officials in the organisation are of a crudely racist stamp: loyal supporters of Inkatha are warned that the UDF consists predominantly of whites, indians and Xhosa lawyers intent on creating mischief at the expense of honest and trusting Zulus.

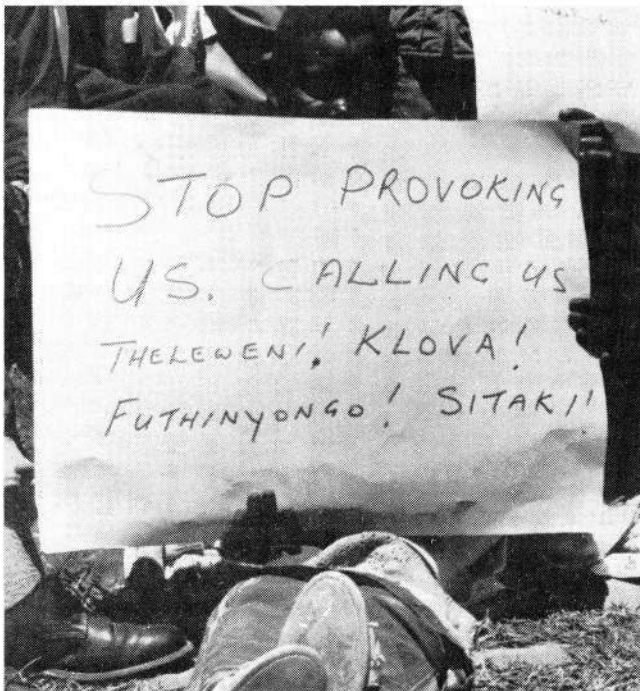
Various commentators, among them Richard Steyn, past editor of the *Natal Witness*, have ascribed the causes of the violence to tension between older, more traditional Zulus from rural areas fighting to defend their way of life from the encroachments of a younger, urban, more irreverent and cosmopolitan generation. Undoubtedly the rural/urban and generational cleavages do play a part in the war but do not explain it. In this conflict the older generation appear to be the aggressors, trying to coerce the youth into traditional patterns of behaviour. However, both sides have displayed impressive cross-generational cohesion: Inkatha Youth Brigade cadres fight alongside older Inkatha members against young comrades who in turn are supported by the elders of their communities. Likewise, around Pietermaritzburg, support for both the UDF and Inkatha straddles the urban/rural divide. In fact, Inkatha's support base in the rural areas is less strong than might be expected.

The causes of the war appear to be more deep seated and political than the generational or geographical analysis concedes. According to Gerry Mare and Georgina Hamilton in their paper, "Policing 'liberation politics'", the conflict derives from a basic political difference between the two movements. Although both describe themselves as liberation organisations, Inkatha's version of liberation could be seen as the more rhetorical. As the ruling party of a self-governing homeland, (whether it is formally inde-

pendent or not) Inkatha can be accused of upholding apartheid structures, or, at the very least, of benefitting from these structures. Mare and Hamilton see the Chief Minister's frequent demands for greater powers as deriving from his desire for greater control over the areas and population which fall within the political ambit of KwaZulu, rather than constituting a real challenge to apartheid.

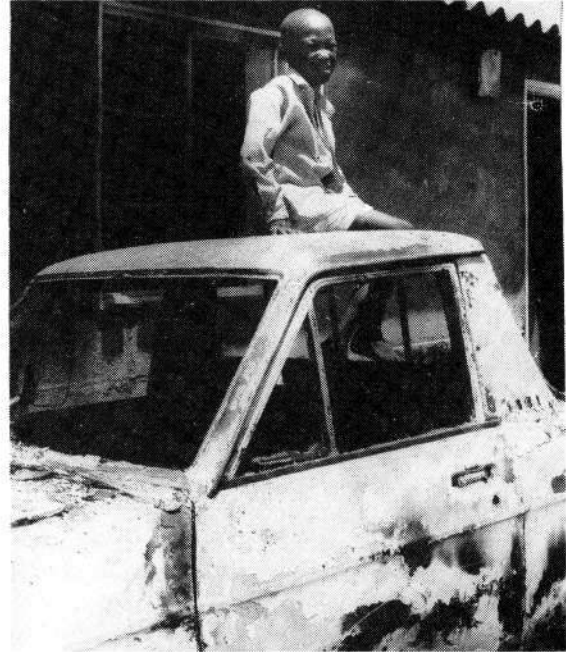
Mare and Hamilton point out that the KwaZulu Legislative Assembly has ratified the entire corpus of South African security legislation, including the emergency regulations, and has adopted its most iniquitous aspects, such as detention without trial and the banning of organisations and publications deemed undesirable by the KwaZulu government. Chief Buthelezi has frequently called on the South African government to hand over all police stations in KwaZulu to the KwaZulu Police (ZP) on the basis that it is imperative that the KwaZulu government be seen to be responsible for law and order in its townships. In particular the ZP is expected to counter the activities of 'external subversive agents' whose actions are a threat to freedom and democracy. On closer examination it transpires that these 'agents' are supporters of the ANC and the UDF.

The UDF was formed to protest and campaign against apartheid legislation and its effects on the daily lives of black South Africans. Inkatha, through the KwaZulu government, is seen to implement this legislation in KwaZulu. It is therefore inevitable that these two organisations should clash. Inkatha does not welcome even moderate political opposition in its domain – KwaZulu has, in effect, a one-party parliament. The political challenge posed by the UDF is therefore completely intolerable to Inkatha and the KwaZulu government.



The gulf between Inkatha and various radical organisations such as the UDF, is illustrated by a long history of conflict of which the present war is the bloody outcome. Chief Buthelezi locates the antagonism as arising from a clash between Inkatha and the ANC in 1979. Then, when the UDF was formed in 1983, Inkatha was excluded from

affiliating to the Front in the unlikely event that it should wish to do so. Chief Buthelezi correctly took this as a particular affront. In the Pietermaritzburg area, the Chief Minister has interpreted the various initiatives of the UDF and COSATU as a challenge and provocation to himself, his honour and the honour of his organisation.



A milestone in the conflict between Inkatha and the UDF and COSATU occurred in May 1985, when workers at the BTR Sarmcol factory near Howick went on strike, demanding that the firm's management recognise their union. They were all dismissed. In protest, the workers organised a consumer boycott in Howick and Pietermaritzburg and called for a stayaway from work on July 18. Inkatha and Chief Buthelezi came out against both these tactics and appealed to people to ignore these calls. Chief Buthelezi claimed correctly, that some people who broke the boycott were forced to drink washing detergent and cooking oil. He also said that the strikers and their campaigns enjoyed no popular support and for the organisers to continue with them in the light of his personal opposition constituted a deliberate challenge and insult to himself. To his chagrin, the stayaway was a success. Almost the entire black working population of the Pietermaritzburg area stayed away from work.

In May 1987, COSATU again called on its members to observe a stayaway in protest against the whites-only general election held on May 7. Again Chief Buthelezi called on workers to ignore the call, and again without success.

The UDF and COSATU contest this interpretation of events. They contend that throughout the 1980s Inkatha has consistently opposed all political activity undertaken by 'progressive' organisations:

- In 1980, vigilantes assaulted and abducted school pupils out on boycott in the Durban township of Kwa-Mashu.
- Also in 1980, at the University of Zululand, Ngoye, students critical of Inkatha were beaten up by members of the entourage of Chief Buthelezi, Chancellor of the university.



– In 1983, five students at Ngoye were killed by vigilantes for chanting derogatory slogans about Chief Buthelezi and Inkatha.

– In 1985, after a wave of arson and looting in the townships around Durban, Inkatha members mobilised to 'stamp out this criminal activity' and used the opportunity to launch a successful search and destroy operation against UDF organisation in the area.

Around Pietermaritzburg, the UDF account continues, Inkatha's opposition has been unstinting. They admit that some people were assaulted and intimidated but point out that in general the Sarmcol campaigns enjoyed enormous support among the black population in the region. The boycott and stayaway were not intended as a challenge to Chief Buthelezi – on the contrary, once the strength and fervour of his opposition became known it was decided to call off the boycott rather than risk a civil war. But Inkatha's opposition was not restricted to the Sarmcol campaign. In mid-1985 the establishment of the UDF-affiliated Imbali Civic Association (ICA) was undermined by Inkatha, Members of the ICA were harassed and the chairman's house was firebombed. In August, Patrick Pakkies, Mayor of Imbali and an Inkatha town councillor, together with Velaphi Ndlovu, KwaZulu MP for Imbali, led a march on the Federal Theological Seminary (FEDSEM). They accused the seminarians of providing a sanctuary for UDF supporters. The vigilantes ordered them to close the place down immediately, FEDSEM was granted an interdict restraining Pakkies, Ndlovu and their followers from further attacking the institution or its associates.

In December 1986, three COSATU supporters were picked up and killed by vigilantes following an Inkatha rally in Mpophomeni, home of the Sarmcol strikers. The vigilantes had been bussed into the township and the rally was a show of strength by Inkatha in an area heavily supportive of COSATU and the UDF. A large contingent of ZP had been deployed in the township that night, but they did nothing to prevent the abductions and murders, nor to arrest the murderers, all of whom had been identified as well known Inkatha members.

In the same month, township residents who observed the UDF's 'Christmas Against the Emergency Campaign' by switching off their lights and cutting out all festivities were attacked by vigilantes and their houses were stoned.

The May 1987 stayaway was not intended as a slight against Chief Buthelezi, although the fact that 90% of the

workers in the area ignored his appeal and stayed away did signal a significant political defeat for him and for Inkatha.

The UDF claims that from August to November 1987, Inkatha warlords and vigilantes conducted a campaign of forced recruitment into the organisation. Any who resisted, refused to join, or having joined, refused to be drafted into the vigilante army were killed or forced to flee. To back up these claims, the UDF has produced affidavits and eye-witness accounts of people approached by Inkatha in this way. The UDF points to this recruitment drive as the immediate catalyst of the war.

Of these alternative histories of a decade of conflict between Inkatha and the UDF and its forebears, the non-Inkatha account appears to be the more plausible. It has fewer omissions and fabrications and unlike Chief Buthelezi's rendition it avoids any appeal to a 'conspiracy theory'.

It can be argued that Chief Buthelezi has consistently declined to take the objectives of the various UDF and COSATU campaigns at face value: . . . protesting against poor education, campaigning for the re-instatement of dismissed workers, establishing structures of democratic community representation, protesting against the disenfranchisement of the black population of South Africa . . . Instead he tends to regard all campaigns and initiatives on the part of 'progressive' organisations (in Natal at least) as part of a wide-ranging and sinister conspiracy dedicated to undermining his person, reputation and organisation. To dismiss the obvious in favour of the devious seems an unreliable approach, not only to history, but also to politics. Chief Buthelezi frequently claims that the political actions of 'progressive' organisations are planned as a direct challenge to his political control over the region; but the charge could be levelled at the Chief Minister that this is an inversion of the true state of affairs, and that it is he himself who issues the challenge by opposing each campaign after the fact and by doing so in strong and threatening terms.

These years of chronic antagonism place the present war in historical context, but the fundamental questions remain: why Pietermaritzburg and why September 1987?

At the conclusion of the 1986 Indaba conference, a plan for the establishment of the federal political entity of Natal/KwaZulu was ratified by the various participants. As a political idea the Indaba won the support of the Inkatha Central Committee, many white residents of Natal, and certain sections of the local media. Certainly Chief Buthelezi and Inkatha stood, and if implemented stand to gain much from the Indaba proposals, not least of which are the extension of Inkatha's influence beyond the borders of KwaZulu and the elevation of Chief Buthelezi to the premiership of the province. However, to secure this new dispensation (leaving aside such other obstacles as the opposition of the South African government) the Chief Minister had to prove his credentials by bringing into the scheme the black population of Natal which he claims to represent.

Chief Buthelezi's constituency has always been mea-

sured by the size of the membership of Inkatha, and this figure though large in absolute terms, is small relative to the six million Zulus who live in the province. Inkatha's support, though widespread, is hardly universal among blacks in Natal and the shortfalls are most noticeable in urban areas. Pietermaritzburg, in particular, has never been an Inkatha stronghold and Chief Buthelezi's command over the allegiance of the population of this region is relatively weak compared with the support he carries in the more remote, rural areas of KwaZulu.

Even in Vulindlela, which falls within the borders of KwaZulu, support for Inkatha is passive rather than active. In the townships of Ashdown and Imbali Inkatha-led town councils have been established in the past but they were so unpopular and unsuccessful that the former has ceased to exist and in Edendale, the largest township in the area, support for Inkatha is, at best, tepid.



In his paper, "Inkatha, Political Violence and the Struggle for Control in Pietermaritzburg", Nkosinathi Gwala attributes the major causes of the present war to Inkatha's desire to win control over Edendale. Gwala points out that blacks have enjoyed freehold rights in Edendale since the early 1840s, a situation which chafes both the South African government and Inkatha: the former because it is faced with an autonomous township which escapes the controls of the Black Local Authorities Act, and the latter because it would dearly like to incorporate Edendale into KwaZulu, or failing that, at least establish a town council in the township.

According to Gwala, Inkatha's political clout relies less on voluntary, popular support than on the organisation's access to bureaucratic entry points in black urban and rural areas of Natal. These entry points consist of control over the distribution of rights and resources such as access to land and employment and trading opportunities. Wherever Inkatha encounters resistance, it seeks to overcome this opposition either by strengthening its bureaucratic entry points where they exist, or where they are absent, through the incorporation of the troublesome area into KwaZulu.

In places such as Edendale, where neither option is available, Gwala contends, Inkatha local officials have used coercive recruitment to draw in new members.

Inkatha denies that its members resort to such measures, and has repeatedly stated that forced recruitment is a prohibited practice. There is no denial, however, that a recruitment campaign took place in the Pietermaritzburg

area in late 1987, or that there was a stream of allegations about malpractice on the part of some recruitment officials.

Whether the campaign was indeed a concerted attack, as the UDF claims, and whether coercive measures were used (and certainly there is no reason, on the evidence, to doubt the veracity of these claims), the campaign was an important component of the power struggle that has defined political activity in the region for the last ten years. Both sides are uncompromising in their attitude towards the other – they see their opponents as military enemies rather than political competitors. A recruitment campaign conducted by either side, and by whatever means, is seen as a provocative act of aggression. By the end of 1987, Inkatha and the UDF – COSATU had been circling each other for some time in an atmosphere of increasing tension; Inkatha's campaign took this tension beyond its critical limit and provided the excuse and motive for outright war.

CONCLUSION

The national political terrain has changed dramatically since the war started. The eclipse of former State President P.W. Botha and the advent of F.W. de Klerk to the State Presidency, together with the increasing legitimacy of the ANC in white business and political circles has ushered in a new era of reconciliation and atonement on the part of the government. The unbanning of the ANC, the release of Nelson Mandela and other political prisoners, the start of the negotiation process – all these changes, too, the nature of the war and the search for peace. The first and most important consequence is that the ANC has become a major player, rather than the minor force giving diplomatic support to the UDF and COSATU, which had been the extent of its involvement in the Natal conflict before its unbanning.

Now, however, the ANC has to address the war as its own political problem. There is no doubt that the organisation wants peace in the region – continuing violence undermines its claim to hold the disciplined support of hundreds of thousands of people in Natal. In general, ANC statements on the subject of the war have been conciliatory towards Inkatha (their harshest criticism is reserved for the police, and in particular, the Minister of Law and Order) and have stressed the need for unity and a commitment to peace. At his first rally in Natal, Nelson Mandela specifically commended Chief Buthelezi and Inkatha for their stand against apartheid over the years, and he called on his followers to "close down the death factories, throw your weapons into the sea".

However, as that rally grimly indicated, the gulf between intent and implementation persists. Many ANC supporters, comrades for whom the war has become the most tangible aspect of their lives, and for whom enmity towards Inkatha is simply taken for granted, were unimpressed by Mandela's appeal. Many expressed their displeasure by walking out of the stadium during the rally; others explained that although they would like to renounce violence and throw away their weapons, it would be suicidal to do so in the absence of a reciprocal disarmament by Inkatha.

While the ANC faces difficult problems reconciling its

militant Natal constituency to peace talks with Inkatha, the difficulties facing Chief Buthelezi are even more stark. Aside from the immediate requirements of the Indaba (which itself seems more and more to be on the decline as political developments overtake it), Chief Buthelezi is concerned to secure his regional power base once and for all. Unlike the ANC, he has no national constituency to fall back on; all his support is concentrated in Natal. Without Pietermaritzburg behind him, he cannot claim to be the pre-eminent force in the region, and until his position in Natal is unassailable, his claim to be a national political leader of stature equal to the leadership of the UDF, COSATU and the ANC will amount to no more than pretension.

After two years and more of warfare, Chief Buthelezi's claims to be the authentic voice of the Zulu nation are looking increasingly threadbare. Inkatha's influence in Pietermaritzburg is no greater than it was before the war began – if anything, it is weaker. The war has seen the rise of local warlords who have established personal power bases. The allegiance which these warlords presently give to Inkatha is based as much on political pragmatism as on ideological loyalty, and the Chief Minister could face the unpleasant prospect of a warlords' revolt should they conclude that his political clout is on the wane. Add to this the fact that as many of the warlords have done well materially out of the war, it seems less and less likely that they will favour a complete cessation of hostilities.

To add to Chief Buthelezi's woes, the emergence of the Congress of Traditional Leaders of South Africa (CONTRALESA) has placed fresh strain on Inkatha. Inkatha has always been strong in rural areas where the chiefs and indunas have considerable powers and have used them to bring in membership to the organisation. By petitioning the support of these chiefs, CONTRALESA strikes at the



very heart of Inkatha. Chiefs and indunas who have supported Inkatha for years are now presented with a political alternative. Within Contralesa the Zulu chiefs and their headmen are no longer seen as stooges of the South African state through the proxy of the KwaZulu government: they have been rehabilitated as important traditional leaders with a part to play in the struggle for liberation from apartheid.

Chief Buthelezi and Inkatha appear to have lost support outside the black community too. Many whites who have always cited Chief Buthelezi as the moderate, non-violent hope for the future now reserve their judgement. By now Inkatha's claim to be a non-violent organisation is being seriously reviewed. Overseas too, Chief Buthelezi's image has been tarnished and his reputation as an international statesman has been damaged.

While all these negative factors undermine Chief Buthelezi's ability to restore peace (and for that matter, his own image) he still remains an important political actor, without whose involvement no political solution either in Natal, or nationally is possible. The South African government continues to endorse Chief Buthelezi and Inkatha, but their previous automatic and undisguised preference for Inkatha ahead of other black opposition organisations has been tempered.

The government is no longer able to simply allow the war to run on. Like the ANC, it too has to show that it can ensure peace and stability. This means that it has to find a solution to the violence in Natal, and the first step along that road is the recognition that both Inkatha and the police have hands as bloody, if not bloodier, than the UDF, ANC and COSATU.

The old glib apportionment of blame to the UDF no longer stands. To some extent the government has recognised that simply deploying more policemen in the region is no answer. President De Klerk has already taken steps to 'depoliticise' the police, but as yet this has had little effect. Reports of police partisanship and collusion with Inkatha continue to pour in. Until the Government takes active steps to redress this, their protestations of concern will continue to ring hollow.

Up to now, politicians, and political commentators have tended to focus on joint rallies or meetings addressed by both Chief Buthelezi and Nelson Mandela as the most important step towards peace. They stress the need for a

bipartite (or, bringing in the government, tripartite) peace treaty. But such a step, while necessary and welcome, would constitute only the first, and easiest stage-post on the road to peace. As has been shown, it is not enough for top leaders to issue calls to their followers from lofty platforms. It is vital that Inkatha and the ANC strengthen their intermediate and local levels of organisation. Talks between Mandela and Buthelezi will have neither influence nor purchase without a formal, disciplined chain of communication relaying messages between national and local levels – and that means communication from the bottom up as well as from the top down.

Inkatha already has formal levels of command, but over the past two years, UDF organisations have been smashed by the state of emergency and by Inkatha. They now need the space and resources to resuscitate themselves.

The government too, has to face up to its responsibilities. It owes the people in this region enormous reparations for its wilful neglect over the past few years. Its first task is to restore local residents' trust in the processes of law. This entails the revamping of the police force into a professional impartial body which will arrest and prosecute

the perpetrators of violence with dedication. In addition, special courts should be convened to speed up the process. The police and the courts have forfeited the trust that should be their due and it is up to them to win it back.

Finally, a comprehensive development plan is needed for the region. The government has taken the first steps towards this by putting an unspecified sum aside for revitalising war torn areas. This is a good start but insufficient; here again the government will be dogged by the legacy of its cynical role in the past. A viable development plan should have the government as, at best, a junior partner, with the bulk of the decisions taken by the warring organisations through the mediation of a credible third party.

There is no easy solution to be found for Natal, but the measures outlined above at least provide a start, something positive to work towards. And the difficulties notwithstanding, ultimately none of the parties has any choice: without a solution to Natal, the much vaunted negotiations on the future of South Africa will be just so much empty talk. □

