

Big white lies

Sister Janice McLaughlin, a member of the Maryknoll Sisters, worked with the Catholic Justice and Peace Commission in Rhodesia in 1977. She and three other members of the Commission were arrested and deported for documenting atrocities committed by President Ian Smith's regime

By Sister Janice McLaughlin

Hardly had the media furor over the killing of whites in Zaire subsided when a similar outcry was unleashed by the June killing of white Pentecostal missionaries at Elim near Rhodesia's eastern border.

The Ian Smith regime made the most of the incident—flying foreign journalists to the scene, allowing them to photograph freely and to send back stories without censorship of the gory details. It was quite a contrast to the

military policy and to call for changes in the pursuit of the war. On June 13 their critical remarks were censored by the very government they had joined; the following day Ian Smith met with military and intelligence chiefs, who briefed him with what the London *Guardian* described as "dismal, if not desperate, reports." On June 15 Smith went on the air in England with an appeal for British and American recognition of the internal settlement, in the course of which he admitted that 20 people were dying daily in the war.

Barely a week later the Elim Mission massacre turned the tables, putting the Patriotic Front on the defensive and bolstering the interim leaders. A few days after the incident, when it was still making headlines in Europe



The Niazonia refugee camp in Mozambique after a massacre in August 1977.

same government's response to the massacre of 22 Africans by its security forces two weeks before, when even statements by two African members of Smith's interim Executive Council were censored.

The Western media lapped up the official Rhodesian version of the story and gave only a few lines to the denials of the liberation forces' Patriotic Front; the *Washington Post*, *The New York Times* and the other liberal American newspapers had the dubious distinction of omitting contradictory statements reported by the white Rhodesian Broadcasting Corporation, which told listeners that in the government Assembly—scarcely a hotbed of African "radicalism"—"There were angry scenes in the house as Black opposition members of Parliament referred to the killings of African civilians by security forces, and to claims from members of the British Labour government that Rhodesian troops committed the Elim atrocity for propaganda purposes."

These propaganda purposes are readily apparent. During the past few months, the Patriotic Front had clearly held the initiative. The reputation of government forces had reached an all-time low, both locally and abroad, after three serious massacres of African civilians in little more than a month. The situation had deteriorated to such a degree that even the African members of the interim government were forced to speak out against the

and certain groups were calling for British military intervention, Executive Council member Rev. Ndabaningi Sithole flew to England to win support for the internal settlement.

In the United States, too, the ripples were felt in U.S. Senate debate. An amendment to the State Department's Authorization bill put forward by Republican Senator Jesse Helms of North Carolina called for the removal of sanctions against Rhodesia and was barely defeated by a vote of 48-to-42. Helms is putting forward a compromise 6-month suspension of sanctions when the Security Assistance Authorization bill reaches the Senate floor.

There was also a call in the Rhodesian Parliament for the government to close all missions "in order to remove the temptation for terrorists to attack soft targets which include women and children."

This seemingly humanitarian action may be as important an element in the Smith strategy as any other measure. If adopted, it would remove the only remaining outside witnesses in areas where the war is raging, and leave the government free to intensify its campaign against the African population without fear of international knowledge and censure. Missionaries working in operational areas are bound to have contact with the guerrillas. The slain Pentecostals were living in the heart of guerrilla-occupied territory

and must have been well acquainted with the groups in that vicinity. It seems likely that they would only have remained there if they were on good terms with the guerrilla forces. In rural areas where church personnel did not get along with the freedom fighters, the schools were closed and personnel moved to more secure urban centers.

Some church personnel provide food, shelter and medicine to the liberation army. The church, as a rule, has agreed not to report the presence of guerrillas, a crime in Rhodesia which carries a maximum penalty of death. This policy has led to 11 court cases against Catholic personnel alone since October 1976 and to the deportation of Bishop Donal Lamont, the leading spokesperson for this position. It also accounts for the arrest of Fr. Paul Egli, a Swiss Bethlehem priest who spent nine months in prison before being deported in December 1977, and for the arrest and beating of four African priests and sisters and the deportation of 13 other Catholic missionaries; two more were given deportation orders on June 29.

While the government punishes the church for "aiding terrorists", it also accuses the guerrillas of persecuting that same church which is charged with assisting them—an inconsistency pointed out by the liberation leaders but not apparently understood by the Western media. Isn't it strange, the guerrillas ask, that the churches which help us the most are the ones being attacked, while those which aligned with the government such as the Dutch Reformed Church have been singularly spared?

Robert Mugabe, head of ZANU, whose forces are accused of most of the missionary murders, spoke extensively of relations between the church and his army at the U.N. Conference on Zimbabwe and Namibia held in Maputo, Mozambique, last May. Mugabe, who was raised a Catholic, described various incidents involving church personnel, commenting, "The Smith regime has started a witch-hunting campaign against the Roman Catholic missionaries; the truth is that the white missionaries are being sacrificed by the Smith regime on the mistaken belief that the gullible Western world will believe his side and see justice in his cause and injustice in ours."

Joshua Nkomo, the leader of ZAPU and a Methodist lay preacher, last September made a special radio broadcast from Lusaka thanking missionaries for their services and assuring them they would be needed in a

free Zimbabwe. "We do not hate you, but instead we have a deep admiration for you and for the services and the sacrifices that you are making for the sake of the African people."

One of the most powerful propaganda weapons in the war, seldom mentioned in the American media, has been the Selous Scouts, a special counter-insurgency unit which impersonates guerrillas and commits atrocities in order to discredit the authentic liberation forces. A French mercenary who recently left the Rhodesian army spoke about the Scouts in an interview which appears in the July 9 edition of the Paris weekly *Nouvel Observateur*. He explained that their movements are extremely secret and even the regular army isn't aware of all their activities. "I have been told," he said, "in some operations there were Selous Scouts who disguised themselves as Mozambican soldiers or guerrillas in order to attack the villagers and travelers or kill missionaries." This tactic was designed to make the guerrillas unpopular with the local people, he explained, and was an integral part of the regime's psychological warfare.

Thorough church investigations of previous incidents against missionaries indicate that the Selous Scouts were indeed responsible for many of the deaths. Church personnel are also aware that bandits sometimes call themselves guerrillas but owe allegiance to no nationalist movement. In addition, they have witnessed too many government atrocities against the African population to rule out the possibility that the government might use the same tactics against them.

Those foreign journalists who have probed deeply enough to raise similar questions about government propaganda have paid the price for reporting the truth. Ken Englade, a free-lance reporter writing for *Time* magazine and some U.S. papers, was deported in May after writing about the regime's secret hangings of guerrillas. AP photographer J. Baughman was expelled in December after traveling with the Rhodesian army's Grey Scouts and describing their torture tactics. This June, the Rhodesian authorities refused an entry visa to Polly Toynbee of the London *Guardian*. Last year BBC correspondent Brian Barron was refused an extension of his work permit because, when reporting on a massacre of 23 Africans in northeastern Rhodesia, he said, "Well, we only have the Rhodesian security forces' version of the story."

Such desperate attempts to suppress information may give a clue to who is telling the truth in Rhodesia.

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... 800 people were killed by Rhodesians disguised in Zimbabwean uniforms.