

# LIFE UNDER APARTHEID

**SOUTH  
AFRICA**

Interview with Ash Jamal  
by Melynda Jarratt

ASH JAMAL HAS LIVED IN SOUTH AFRICA FOR MOST OF HIS TWENTY SIX YEARS.

Hailing from Cape Town, Cape Province, along the southern most point of Africa where the Atlantic and the Indian Oceans meet, he has experienced first-hand life under the oppressive yoke of White minority rule called Apartheid. Last Wednesday, Ash Jamal spoke at length about his experiences and personal observations of what life is like in South Africa. A truly interesting and compelling man, his comments provide us with a glimpse behind the heavily fortified curtain of *Apartheid* and demonstrate the perseverance of human spirit in the face of countless adversities.

LIFE IN SOUTH AFRICA IS VERY DIFFERENT. Under the white-led Botha government, segregation according to racial background and inequality for non-whites is a fact of life. Recently, the world has been awakened to the plight of the millions of blacks in South Africa by widespread media coverage of the bloody violence which has erupted there in the last twenty months. Black leaders, among them Steve Biko, Fatima Meer (Natal University Professor), Oliver Tambo (President of the African National Congress), and Nyati Pokela (President of the Pan-African Congress), have over the years lent their support to a world-wide economic boycott of South African products and economic sanctions against the government in the hopes that it will speed up the certain demolition of *Apartheid*; yet their pleas for humane justice remained cloaked in Western governments rhetoric that all their best intentions will someday bear fruit in a equal and just society in South Africa.

YET IN SOUTH AFRICA, LIFE IS ANYTHING BUT EGALITARIAN. Ash should know. He taught in the educational system at the Bouteheuwal High School, at what he calls a "typical, so-called Coloured slum school." In comparison to the White schools, Ash said, the Coloured

schools, where Indian, Coloureds, and Blacks attend are highly inferior with poorer facilities. At this school, Ash taught with a young white woman who although she is sympathetic with the plight of non-whites, must make compromises in her own life if she is to continue working at the Coloured school. She must always, for example, reapply for tenure because her work there as a white is not considered to be permanent. Although most of the teachers there are coloureds or Indians, there are some whites like this young woman, who take advantage of their right to teach anywhere (a pleasure non-whites don't enjoy), because they feel personally motivated by the problems they see there.

THE CHILDREN WHO ATTEND THESE "SLUM SCHOOLS" OFTEN LIVE IN PLACES WHERE SIX OR SEVEN PEOPLE SLEEP IN ONE ROOM. Poverty is almost always a common denominator and many of the times, they must leave school at an early age to become breadwinners or to look after other older or sick members of their extended families. Yet, there are some exceptions even among the poorest households whose parents value and encourage education, perhaps viewing it as the 'way out' they never had. But even in the higher echelons of University they encounter obstacles, as the Quota system ensures that only so many Blacks per year are allowed into the realm of higher education. So no matter how brilliant you are, Ash commented bitterly, if you are a black and you miss out on the Quota system, you will go to Bush College, another highly inferior educational institution.

LIFE UNDER APARTHEID IS DIFFERENT FOR INDIANS. They originally came from India in the mid 1850's to work as indentured labourers in agriculture, and later during the 1900's to work on the railroads. Others, businessmen, merchants and the like came to South Africa to turn a profit, but it was people like Mahatma Ghandi who raised Indian awareness towards indentured labour. However, despite the troubles in the past over Indian indentured labour in South Africa, they managed to develop self-reliance and were treated better so that even today, life is a little easier for them in relation to Blacks or Coloureds. For instance, they don't have to carry the hated "pass" which has become an outstanding symbol of *Apartheid*. Their past experiences have made



Photo by Jamie Aitken

them a nuclear community, which although segregated, made it possible for people like Ash's father, now deceased, to actually thrive on segregation. He explained - "Where I live in Capetown, there are 5-7 streets that are all Indian. In my area, there are only Indian businesses, Indian merchants and tradesmen who deal mostly with the Indian population there. Naturally, my father as an accountant, would deal with the Indian businesses etc. which are segregated, sometimes acting as a go-between for them and whites." In this sense then, the segregation of communities according to racial background becomes an accepted, everyday practice, socially ingrained and hard to dispell.

BUT ASH SAYS THAT YOUNG PEOPLE ARE CONSTANTLY BREAKING DOWN THE BARRIERS THAT SEPERATE THEM FROM OTHER RACIAL GROUPS. "I myself had a choice," he told me, "Either stay in the country and my own neighbourhood, which is a wealthy Indian neighbourhood or teach. Instead, I chose to teach, and by doing so was able to break the confines of the system and become familiar with people of

different cultural backgrounds. "There is heavy mobilization amongst young people, he said, in response to this aroused awareness, and in 1976 for example, at Ash's high school, Livingstone High, teachers were imprisoned, students were shot and wounded by rubber bullets, and a young boy whom Ash knew from down the street was crippled for life. The police have met this mobilization with disdain, and have made sure that they know the movement of every political movement in every community, white or non-white, yet they are being met with increasing opposition. The idea of Tribal Homelands, for example, is "calculated genocide" Ash said, "because the Homelands are impoverished environments. Whole communities have been moved, deprived of their livestock, water, educational facilities and so on, and dumped into tin shacks in areas where there is no economic stability. This creates the ghettoization of blacks as they are no longer considered to be South Africans yet they are dependent on whites for survival. Many travel to the white areas to work as domestics or in labour and sometimes they don't see their families for months until they return to their

Homelands with a paycheck." In a situation like this, it is no wonder that we have seen the pressure building from within South Africa for change, and at the same time an increase in police repression which the white minority government in Pretoria hopes will keep the lid on the kettle. South Africans, from all walks of life are becoming attuned to their-situation, and the youth especially, are on the verge of widespread politicization. This policy of resettlement, which Ash calls "calculated genocide" has played a major role in the violent response of radical South African youths who as of late, have made it quite clear that they do not want to repeat the mistakes of their forefathers.

BUT AREN'T PEOPLE AFRAID OF THE VIOLENCE? In Gatesville, the wealthiest Indian community in Cape Town, "my father used to talk about the Hooligans - you know the ones who would burn books, riot, and generally vandalize public and private property. He didn't understand why coloured students would do these sort of things. He wasn't a pragmatist, nor a fatalist, he was simply happy with his way of life because it suited him financially and socially so he wheeled and dealt with the whites." Perhaps understanding the origins of the violence is the key to unlocking the mystery that surrounds it - the hated pass laws which require only blacks to carry identification "passes", the Homelands for Tribal Blacks, among them the Zulu and Xhosa, the segregated areas for Coloureds and Indians which allow them to come into contact with one another in Educational institutions for example, where they discuss and act upon segregation, and race laws which "classify" or "declassify" a person according to racial background, appearance, marriage or birth. Added to these are a multitude of other forces, economic inequality among them, that have led to an overflow of violence and a death toll which in the last twenty months is fast approaching the 2,000 mark.

IN SOUTH AFRICA, THE WHITES BELIEVE IN THE GENETIC PRINCIPLE. The *Broederbond* ie. the brother bond which unites Afrikaners (the whites) stipulates that Afrikaners should rule the country and that they are superior to others. Although there are "Utopic trends", Ash said, "among a minority of Liberal Afrikaners towards an

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