

## Crackdown: a personal account

## S. Africa: expect a white Christmas

by Judith Marshall

Crackdown! In retrospect, we should have seen it coming. There were tough speeches in the weeks before. As the international pressure from an inquiry into the prison death of Steve Biko mounted, the recurrent theme inside South Africa was that of non-interference from outside. South Africa would go it alone. 'Back to the laager' was the mood of the day.

In Soweto the afternoon before, we had hastily turned down a side street to avoid a careening riot squad truck. Children fled in terror as it roared past. My student companions explained that those in it tended to shoot first and ask questions later. We took refuge in one of the houses. "This matchbox is where I, my mother and father, and my six brothers and sisters live", explained another of the students. There are four room and three room versions of these houses, row after row of them, all identical. At night they are lighted by candlelight. No electricity for Soweto's more than one million residents. Later as I chatted with young children playing in the warm afternoon sun, with their ingeniously constructed wire cars, I could almost think all was normal.

Yet in South Africa today, there is little that is normal. These young children, for example, and as many as 198,000 older students, have all been out of school since last June. More recently their teachers have also resigned from the system. They have said "no" to the Bantu education that relegates them to the role of menial labourers, never able to be more than second or third class citizens in their own country. They have said "no" to the complexes of inferiority engendered by such an education system. If there is one thing "Black Consciousness" means, it is a challenge to the myths of racial superiority, and a determination for black dignity and black action to end apartheid.

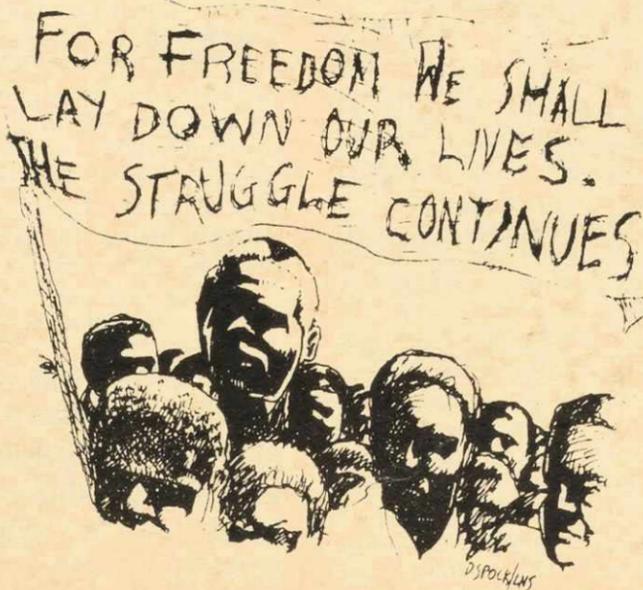
I spent the evening before the crackdown with one of the Soweto principals. We had talked late into the night about education under apartheid and what the teachers and students could do next. He was a middle-aged man, a specialist in literature, a moderate man in every way. He was trying desperately to come up with solutions. There were plans for an informal education program using the youth centers until December and the hope of a new non-Bantu syllabus in the new year. He was pre-occupied with the more than 500 teachers and principals without jobs and salaries. We discussed the feasibility of a representative of the teachers coming to Canada to mobilize support. When he left after midnight, he said it was the first night in weeks that he had been able to sit down, relax, and chat. Presumably at about four that night there was a knock on his door. Detention!

## •The Day of the Crackdown

We arrived promptly at 8:30 Wednesday morning at the offices of Black Community Programmes, the project arm of the Black Peoples' Convention. We had hoped to discuss the possibility for groups in Canada to join various European development agencies and churches in support of such activities as the community health clinics in King Williamstown. Special Branch was there before us. Security police were already going through the files of

their offices. Miraculously they did not hold us too. The next appointment should have been with the Christian Institute—but by then the news was out. There had been a massive crackdown. Eighteen organizations were banned. At least 42 people were detained. Gone also was another major source of pressure with the banning of the main Black newspaper, *The World*, and its affiliate, the *Weekend World*.

The strength of the repressive machinery of the South African state could not have been clearer. Within a few hours, all the main leaders of the Black Consciousness movement were detained and 18 organizations were legislated out of existence. The people in them were strong and good people—dedicated to community-based initiatives, desperately trying to struggle



for change in an incredibly sick and brutal society. Amazingly life on Johannesburg streets continued as usual. Passers-by were seemingly oblivious as various offices were effectively sealed off, stripped of their contents, and as quickly abandoned again by squads of plain-clothesmen and small groups of police in camouflage uniforms, armed with rifles.

White students at Witwatersrand had a noon rally. Angry young people stood up to express their shock and dismay at yet another step towards totalitarianism. The students' only concrete action was to plan to send a telegram of protest to the Justice Minister. The marchers with the telegram were met at the Braamfontein Post Office by police vans, however, and more than 54 students were arrested.

The official justification for the day's events was fantastic. Evening TV brought the Justice Minister, J.T. Kruger, onto the screen, claiming the necessity to protect law and order, the urgency to halt continued unrest and the fermenting of racial tension. He claimed that these were organized and funded by external forces. Yet what were these external forces? They were European and North American development agencies supporting the clinics of the Black Peoples Convention. They were church agencies supporting the wives and children of detainees, or the inter-racial programs of the Christian Institute.

I spent the afternoon of the crackdown with sympathetic white South Africans. They were in despair, seeing the army, police and special branch intent on crushing every semblance of black action, dignity and self-respect. To know how to struggle against such a monstrous repressive apparatus is not simple, for blacks or whites who are committed to change.

## Police questioning

Late afternoon brought a good-bye visit to several people whose organization had been banned but who were not themselves detained. As we chatted about the events of the day and how long it would take people to re-organize themselves, a child playing watchman for us ran in, saying "The police are here." They had gone to the banned offices on the floor above. We made our way quickly to the elevator. As we waited anxiously for it to arrive, 5 or 6 policemen marched down the stairs at the end of the hallway, in camouflage uniforms, rifles in hand. I fully expected a welcoming committee at the main door. Miraculously, they had gone—off in their jeep with whatever contents they wanted from the office. Our thoughts went immediately to the many scenes of police questioning that must have filled Johannesburg's jails that night. The shadow of Steve Biko, tortured to death under questioning, haunted us.

I found myself sobbing quietly as I left Johannesburg the next morning. Partly it was relief. The brushes with riot police, Special Branch and armed soldiers had been too close. Although I knew that the penalties for a Canadian would not likely have been more than immediate deportation, the reality of fear and the feeling of profound relief at escape was powerful. But even more I wept for those I left inside, both black and white, who were committed to struggles for change, despite the monstrous powers of repression so clearly visible that morning.

The crackdown will set them back. But they will surely emerge again, in organizations with other programs, in newspapers with other names. Perhaps the urban workers of the match-box houses may be mobilized and refuse to work. This could bring to a pause the mighty machine that profits from their labour, and dramatically up the pace of change. But re-emerge they surely will, whether sooner or later. Time is on their side. Such a brutal and inhuman domination of a minority over a majority cannot continue indefinitely. And justice and all that relates to dignity and humanity are also on their side. I won't soon forget the urgency of the conversations about health clinics and literacy and group-buying schemes for Soweto. All were part of the new consciousness, a new sense of black capacities and dignity. Nor will I forget the warm smiles, the strong handclaps, and the clenched fist 'power salute' of the few not detained who bade me good-bye. For them, the struggle continues.

Judith Marshall is the Southern Africa projects officer for OXFAM-Canada. She was in South Africa during the recent crackdown

## N.S. group opposes apartheid

The Southern Africa Information Group (SAIG) of Nova Scotia is a voluntary association whose aim is to increase public awareness of events in the Southern African subcontinent.

The organization was founded in 1976 as a response to the growing importance of developments in South Africa, Zimbabwe (Rhodesia), Namibia, Angola, and Mozambique. SAIG is opposed to all forms of racial segregation in this region, and to financial and commercial support

given to minority regimes there by certain Canadian corporations and governments. It supports governments and political movements in Southern Africa which are dedicated to the political and self-determination of the majority population in each country.

In its first year SAIG developed successful education programmes for both its own members and the public at large. The public education program has included: addresses by leaders of

independence movements; a series of film presentations; contact with schools, church groups, and the media; publication of articles in local and regional newspapers; the dissemination of literature on Southern Africa.

Most SAIG members have joined the organization because of an interest in Southern Africa, and without any specialized knowledge of the region. Members have been able to increase their own knowledge through presentations, discussions, and use of the organization's library.

SAIG is a non-profit, independent, and non-sectarian organization. Any persons who are interested can write to SAIG at 2975 Parkdale Avenue.