

THE EFFECTS OF THE CURRENT UNREST ON TOWNSHIP CHILDREN

A INTRODUCTION/OVERVIEW

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Thousands of school children took to the streets in 1976 in protest against Bantu Education. The protest spread to other parts of the country and marked a new era in resistance to apartheid.

Township children were jailed, shot and killed, some served long prison sentences, others lost valuable years of schooling, many were forced into the lowest paid unskilled jobs while others joined the ranks of the increasing numbers of unemployed youth in our country.

A new generation of young militants has emerged. They are the youth who have committed themselves to the struggle for a democratic future. Based on their political experience in 1976, they became the activists of the youth congresses which mushroomed in every corner of our country. These are the young people who continued the battle on the school grounds and joined the ranks of the Congress of South African Students (COSAS) which is now banned. Thousands of school children were mobilized and their demands for equal education and the right to organise at schools, were echoed across the country.

And, there have been those young men and women who through their experiences of life under apartheid, through police brutality and violence came to the conclusion that there is only one option open to them, and that is to take up arms. They are the children of Soweto 1976 who swelled the ranks of Umkonto we Sizwe, the military wing of the African National Congress. They are the children who have been captured and sentenced to long prison terms. It is these very children of Soweto who have been executed - Johannes Shabangu, David Moise, Bobby Tsotsobe and others - for armed attacks on the state.

In the 1980's, the struggle against apartheid has escalated and has reached the proportions of a civil war. The Botha Government faced with a deep economic crisis coupled with the determination of the people to be free, declared a state of emergency on 21 July, 1986. This was no doubt a desperate act and an admission of defeat that their so-called reform initiatives failed. The Black Local Authorities were rejected by the African people as entrenching apartheid. It is these very Local Authorities which have been the object of Black anger. They were viciously attacked for making apartheid institutions work. In the coloured and Indian elections in August 1984, more than 80% of the people showed their rejection of the tricameral parliamentary system. The people's demands were for:

- * a non racial and a democratic South Africa
- * universal franchise and
- * for a united South Africa free of Bantustans and the Group Areas Act.

Throughout the campaigns of the 1980's, particularly against the Black Local Authorities and the tricameral parliamentary system, the children participated along side their parents. They boycotted classes in protest while others, joined their parents on the picket lines, calling on them not to vote in 'puppet' elections.

The school boycotts continued in different parts of the country, many children died in unrest at this time. And, when the state of emergency was declared, the government's iron fist was slammed down on our children in a way that we have never seen before. The government banned COSAS, an organisation of school children. Up to 8,000 people, including more than 2,000 children under the age of 16, were detained since the start of the emergency.¹ Many children were members of COSAS, and the Youth Congresses which are affiliates of the United Democratic Front.² In reply to questions in parliament recently, the Minister of Law and Order, Louis le Grange said that the detentions were primarily of a preventive nature.

The effects of detention on these children and their families will be felt for years to come. An eight year old boy was charged with intimidation and refused bail. When he was visited by his family, "the boy was frantic and crying." The next day when he appeared in court he was crying and had a huge bruise on his forehead, he could not say how it was sustained.³ There have been other reported incidents of children receiving psychiatric treatment due to detention.

But detention has been one form of state violence against children. The presence of the South African Defence Force in the townships has exposed children to police brutality. Many children have been physically injured and treated by township doctors for the adverse effects of rubber bullets, teargas and baton charges. There have been further allegations of rape and abuse of children. 4

A group of Concerned Social Workers convened a conference in October, 1985 to highlight the brutalisation of children. A press release issued by the Concerned Social Workers states the following:

"A child welfare Social Worker and the Detainees Parents Support Committee have records of children who have been reported missing. Parents are frantic about the whereabouts of their children. Other forms of violence include the whipping of children by the Defence Force in an attempt to force them out of their homes and into classrooms. The information that we have is still sparse. It relies mainly on testimonies from parents, children and professionals working with such persons. Parents are reluctant to expose their children by reporting them as missing, injured or detained for fear of recrimination from authorities. The result has been that many cases are unreported".

We are concerned about the effects of children's exposure to and experience of violence in the townships. We believe that such exposure can never be conducive to the physical, mental, moral spiritual and social development of children" 5

At a meeting of doctors, social workers, psychologists and psychiatrists on 14 September 1985, the following resolution was passed condemning the brutalisation of children:

"We express our deeply felt horror and revulsion at the State's assault on children and call upon the Government to release all the detained children immediately into the custody of their parents or guardians and an immediate end to the security forces' harassment and detention of children. Children are particularly susceptible to the development of long - term adverse effects of these brutalising experiences - such as anxiety disorders, adjustment and behaviour disorder and even psychotic episodes".

Parents themselves have suffered deeply because of concern for their children. Many were frantically running around the township contacting friends and organisations which could assist them. The mother of Fanie Guduka, an eleven year old who spent 57 days in prison described her pain. She said: "I am taking tranquilisers for tension. Since Fanie was in prison I have had pains in my heart. I have also spent a lot of money buying fresh food and fruit for him while he was in prison" 6

A Star Editorial in referring to Fanie's case 7 condemned violence against children saying:

"The case of an 11 year old child who was kept in prison for 57 days is at last before the courts..... He allegedly threw stones..... It took a Supreme Court ruling to get him out of jail He was kept in police cells to protect society from his influence and to ensure he did not flee justice What sort of madness is this?"

Human Rights Lawyer Mr. Nicholas Hayson said that South Africa departed significantly from international standards

in its imprisonment of children. "International Codes, he said, embody an almost preemptory requirement that children should not be held in the same prison as adults. While South African law complies with this and stipulates that children should not be kept in jail at all unless no other institution existed these rules are honoured more in the breach than the observance" 8

The pressure has resulted in the minister of Justice, Kobie Coetzee taking some action in this regard. He announced that a separate prison would be made available at Leeukop Prison by April 1986 for detained and sentenced juveniles.

The facts speak for itself. The state of emergency provided security forces with a license to commit indiscriminate acts of violence against our children. South Africa, is a signatory to the United Nations charter on the rights of children. Yet, the South African government has unashamedly violated these terms. The experiences and exposure of township children to violence will undoubtedly result in the destruction of our children in every sphere of their development.

Today, we are dealing with a new phenomenon state abuse of children. According to the children's Act No. 3 of 1960 the state is the custodian of the child. The causes of child abuse is sought in the intra-psychic conflicts of parents who may have been abused themselves as children. Whilst this may be the case, the Black child in the township is now coming face-to-face with its custodian in the uniform of the troops driving in caspirs. State abuse of children should be exposed for what it is. And, any person who has committed any act of violence against any child must be brought to account. This was one of the resolutions adopted at the "Conference to promote the rights of the child" Oct., 1985.

The present conflict in our country has set the same cycle in motion as 1976. Today, the "Young Lions" as they are called in the townships are the products of this era. They are the marshalls dressed in Khaki at mass funerals, leading the singing, directing the crowds and saluting their fallen comrades with the pledge that "your struggle will be taken forward". Another generation is growing up in our townships, what will their future be? The answers are written on the walls, the people know it and the government knows it.

The current unrest in the townships and its major effects on our children have been traced since 1976. From this overview it is evident that children under apartheid are affected in many ways. But the most notable effect upon children has been their militance, their politicisation and commitment to a democratic South Africa. This is the new generation of young militants that parents, teachers

and no doubt, the government will be dealing with. This however, does not mean that the adverse psychological effects on a new generation is being underplayed. A lay Councillor at the conference to "promote children's rights" stressed the adaptability, the resillience of these children who have suffered under repression.

Since, the politicisation of young people has taken place in the classrooms and on the school grounds, the writer will trace the nature of the education crisis, the relationship between the parents, pupils, teachers and attempts to unite in action. It is through these struggles that children have directly encountered the police. A further focus will be on the crisis and the war in our country and its effects on the township child.

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B The Township Child - A Victim Against Odds

To be born into an apartheid society is to be born into a battleground. It is a battle for one's survival, for one's human dignity. The battle of the Black child starts from the day it is conceived. The poor diet and nutrition of the mother cannot feed the foetus adequately. Her stresses and strains of living under apartheid also affects the foetus. Poor medical care, working long hours with little rest to help meet the needs of the family are all factors which determine the quality of life of that new born baby.

Malnutrition is the single biggest killer of black children in South Africa. One of the myths propogated by the South African government is that although poverty is a factor, ignorance, bad eating habits, superstition and 'taboos' are largely to blame. The truth of the matter is that in the face of grinding poverty it is simply impossible to obtain enough of the right kind of food for adequate nutrition. A 1979 survey⁹ on infant mortality demonstrated the following:

- * Mortality rates for both African and Coloured children aged one to four years were 13 times as high as for whites.
- * The majority of infant mortality deaths occurred in children under five years of age.
- * Deaths below one year were six times higher among Africans and Coloureds than among whites.

The townships have limited recreation and day-care facilities. Working mothers, due to financial circumstances are forced to go back to work when their children are less than three months old.

This can seriously affect the physical and emotional health of the mother and child. Cock et al¹⁰ in their study on day-care facilities in Soweto found that there are six creches run by the West Rand Administration Board which cater for 720 children out of a total of 192,000 pre-school children in the township.

The lack of housing in black townships has resulted in over crowding, ill-health and insecurity. Squatting has increased, there are problems related to poor sanitation and water supply. The governments' housing policy is designed to curb its expenditure on housing and shelving this responsibility onto township dwellers to provide their own homes through self-help schemes. "Another reason for this cut-back is the fact that the Department of Community Development does not want to be seen as the landlord of the working classes, it does not want to be the target of township protests. Instead, the government wants to shift

the responsibility for housing onto the private business sector. 11

At school, children are subjected to Bantu Education, an education which prepares them for a life under apartheid. The teacher-pupil ratio is 1:43. This means that there is one teacher for every 43 black children in comparison with one teacher for every 18 white children.¹² Over the period 1975-76, for every R1.00 spent on an African child, R14.07 was spent on a white child.¹³ The schools are poorly equipped, teachers are underqualified and the schools are overcrowded. The reality is that the school drop-out rate for African children is very high. Many do not have more than four years of schooling.¹⁴

The black child is educationally disadvantaged in every way and is forced to take on the most unskilled work. Although it is illegal in South Africa to employ any child under the age of 16, many black children are obliged to work in order to survive. With the disintegration of many family units because of the migrant labour system, some black children are homeless and have to find some means of supporting themselves. In the farming areas, black children are expected to work alongside their parents, for pitiful wages or food rations. Many children are illegally employed as newspaper vendors, in factories and as domestic servants. Unemployment among black youth is very high.¹⁵ Studies done in Soweto have shown that unemployment has risen at 5,5% per year during the current recession.

These are some of the realities of life under apartheid for black children. It is a life filled with insecurity, with no hope for a better life. It is certainly a battle for survival as children and their parents find themselves in the whirlpool of vicious apartheid laws such as, influx control, the migrant labour system and forced removals. A system which breaks up family life and forces every sixteen year old to apply for a passbook. Around this age most black children begin to engage in a series of hide and seek games with the police for not carrying a pass.

This is generally not the first encounter of the township child with the police. In their short life time, they may have been exposed to pass raids or even landed in prison while being strapped to their mother's backs. A township child experiences the cruelty of the system at an early age. They learn survival skills at an early age and are generally quite resilient. But their world is a harsh one of empty bellies, of disintegrated families and of violence in many different forms. They are the victims against odds.

G Education Crisis - Parent - Student - Teacher Alliance

It is important to make the connection between the student revolt which started in 1976 and the conditions under which these children had to grow up and develop. Although the spark in 1976 was the question of Afrikaans as a medium of instruction in the schools, student demands shifted very quickly to a rejection of the whole system of Bantu Education and of apartheid.

Active support for the students' demands in 1976 was not forthcoming from parents. Except for isolated instances of support such as the Soweto Parents Association, the children were running their own struggle with their own leadership irrespective of the wishes of their parents. The passive support of parents can be explained in terms of their experiences of brutality of the system in the 1960's. There was the 1960 declaration of the state of emergency, the banning of the African National Congress and the Pan African Congress. In short, because of the repressive nature of the apartheid regime in the early sixties, the black masses were almost completely silenced. They were made to live in fear for almost two decades.

The failure of parents to struggle with their children and to provide leadership simply widened the generation gap. The children almost lost confidence in their parents. They felt that their parents were prisoners of fear and death. It took a great deal of effort on the part of progressive groups and organisations during the first part of the 1980's to address this crisis of confidence. They knew that this could only be achieved in action by becoming actively involved in resisting the apartheid regime.

A major event which began to restore the confidence of the children was the launching of the United Democratic Front in 1983. For the first time in many years their parents who are the residents in the communities and the workers on the factory floor, joined hands with the children to denounce apartheid. Together they campaigned against the hated Community Council system and high rents. They were detained, tortured and teargassed together for the noble good of justice for all in our country.

This time the stay aways of 1984 and 1985 were called by community organisations and trade unions. Chris Dlamini, the then President of the Federation of S.A. trade unions (FOSATU) said that workers had to deal with the education crisis which affected their children. He said that the workers are the ones who pay

for the education of their children and are therefore obliged to enter this struggle with their children. The support of COSAS for the Simba boycott was such a case in point. These actions gave meaning to the COSAS slogan: "Student Worker Action. This resulted in better communication between students and workers.

As the education crisis intensified, more concerned parents began supporting the school children. In September 1985, the Soweto Parents Crisis Committee (SPCC) was formed. In other parts of the country parents - students and teachers committees were formed. These alliances grew out of a growing awareness that parents must participate in their children's education. There is a realisation that the government uses education to promote its own ideology, to control the masses and to produce cheap labour. Parents and teachers have also realised that to change the education system, the political system that controls education must also be changed. Students in alliance with workers and the community have also used their power to challenge the economic system which promotes inequality and oppression.

The SPCC convened a national consultative conference in Johannesburg from 28 - 29 December, 1985 to address the education crisis. All over the country, thousands of children were boycotting classes. The children and their parents were calling for: the withdrawal of the troops from the townships, the lifting of the state of emergency, for the release of students and other leaders from detention and for the postponement of the final examinations. The national conference of parents, teachers and students resolved that the children would return to school. The Botha regime was given three months to meet their demands.

No doubt, the children's confidence in their parents and teachers have been restored. A relationship based on respect for the ideas and concerns of the children has been forged. In this regard Rev. Tsele, publicity officer of the SPCC said that 'the most difficult task of the SPCC has been to manage the tension between conservative parents and radical students. It should be noted that these students have been fighting apartheid all by themselves. At times, they think that the moderate ideas of their parents will detract them from their goals. The task of the SPCC has been to build an understanding between parents and children. This understanding must be a political one.'

Township children have however, not only been active in student organisations, they have participated in youth organisations, in political organisations and in

Church youth groups where they have played an important role in the development and training of youth leadership.

D The War in our Country - Its Effects on the Township Child.

As the resistance to oppression and exploitation intensified, state repression increased to alarming proportions. The revolt in the Vaal Triangle in 1984 resulted in a bloody confrontation between the people and the police. 7,000 troops besieged the Vaal townships conducting house-to-house searches to stamp out the resistance and to restore "law and order".

As more and more black townships revolted against the regime, the South African Defence Force (SADF) moved in and occupied the townships. There have been allegations of rape, torture, assaults and brutal killings by the security forces in the townships. In the Western Cape, the ambushing of three youths on Thorton Road, Athlone caused national and international outrage. But this did not stop the consumer boycotts particularly in the Eastern Cape. The people demanded an end to the emergency and for the withdrawal of the troops from the townships.

In the minds of the people in the townships there is a war between them and the apartheid army. The army is perceived as an enemy army. They see it as an army which is defending the white minority government, elected by whites alone for white interests alone. They see it as an army protecting white privileges at the expense of the loss of black lives.

It is for these reasons that those in power must be warned that the deployment of the troops in the townships is a dangerous act. An act which could only lead people to think of defending themselves and toying with thoughts of what they call an alternative people's army.

This description of the war situation in our country depicts the conditions under which the township child is growing up. This situation has affected children more than many people realise. The world of the township child is extremely violent. It is a world made up of teargas, bullets, whippings, detention and death on the streets. It is an experience of military operations and night raids, of roadblocks and body searches. It is a world where parents and friends get carried away in the night to be interrogated. It is a world where people simply disappear, where parents are assassinated and homes are petrol bombed. Such is the nature of the exposure of the township child.

Children these days spend their time thinking and planning how to outwit the security forces and to take defensive action. For instance, to fight the effects of teargas, they organise cloths and water when there are mass funerals. Buckets of water are put along the route of the funeral procession in case of a teargas attack. They have learnt how to set up barricades and keep the security forces out.

Life in the townships seems to have changed irrevocably. A township resident said: 'when my two year old daughter sees a military vehicle passing, she looks for a stone!' Nursery school children are no exception. They too have learnt the language of 'siyanyova', (we will destroy) which is the popular slogan used to express the action of the youth in attacking what they call "targets", meaning the symbols of the apartheid regime and its forces.

The exposure of children to brutalisation in the townships has resulted in adaptive behaviour patterns. They are learning a different set of survival skills. Their songs tell of the world as they perceive it, a violent world, a war situation. They move in groups in the townships with a commander in charge and his armed forces. Their arms are stones, sticks and probably petrol bombs. They have different heroes, no longer are the local football players or the Bruce Lee's of the movies their heroes. They know now only of the Mandelas and the Sisulus. And, there are those who are joining the ranks of Umkhonto we Sizwe to fight the system.

Whilst many young children are channelling their energies politically, there are those children whose exposure and experiences of brutalisation will harm their social, physical, spiritual, moral and mental development forever. We will be facing the future with children who have been socialised to find violence completely acceptable. Moreover, this growing future generation will be more ready to make sacrifices, they will be more determined to be free.