

THE VAAL TRIANGLE UPHEAVAL

When rioting broke out in the Vaal Triangle in September leaving a trail of death and destruction, it should have come as no surprise to the civil authorities against whom it was, initially, largely aimed.

Tensions, say observers, had been rising for a month, since the Lekoa Town Council (which controls the townships of Sharpeville and Sebokeng) announced rent increases on council-owned houses, effective from September 1. Rent increases were also announced in Evaton.

In the face of unemployment and economic recession, these rent increases, channelled through community councils installed by the government, represented an inflammatory last straw.

The increases — R5,90 a month on Orange/Vaal Development Board (OVDB) houses and R5,50 a month on privately-owned dwellings — were necessary because of rising costs in refuse removal, water and electricity, said Lekoa Mayor Mr Esau Mahlatsi.

Organisations like the Sharpeville Anti-Rent Committee, the Vaal Civic Association, the United Democratic Front, the Congress of Students of South Africa, the Azanian Peoples' Organisation, the Vaal Women's Organisation and local trade unions resolved to ignore the increases.

Vaal Triangle residents were already paying an average rent of R62,96 a month, the highest black township rental in the country.

The protests began quietly enough when residents decided to hold mass demonstrations in church halls, against the increases. The council issued a directive forbidding the meetings but churchmen involved ignored the warnings and the meetings went on.

On September 2, about 100 youths in Sharpeville and Boipatong, near Vanderbijlpark went on the rampage, stoning cars and buses, bottlestores and the homes of Sharpeville councillors.

As violence and anger escalated, homes of councillors were gutted in Sharpeville and private houses, liquor outlets, a bus depot, council offices and a school set alight in Boipatong, Bophelong and other Vaal Triangle townships.

The deputy mayor of Sharpeville, Mr Sal Dlamini was hacked to death and his body placed under his car which was doused with petrol and set alight. Two youths were shot, apparently by Mr Dlamini before he died.

Rioters hacked and burnt their victims to death, stoned cars, destroyed homes and businesses, schools, beer halls and buses.

Police lashed out with sjamboks and quirts, "tearsmoke" birdshot, rubber and lead bullets.

They fired on groups of youths. In response, rioters turned on policemen, attacking individuals and fire-bombing the SAP single quarters in Sharpeville.

Within days, 26 people had died, at least 300 were injured and damage was estimated at R30 million.

Later reports suggested that hundreds of people suffering from injuries received during the disturbances refused to go to hospital because they feared arrest.

The toll of dead included infants, school children and adults, innocent passersby (including a 26-year-old mother of two who was shot in the mouth when she went to the toilet in her yard), and two community councillors.



A Councillor's house in Sharpeville; Photo, Learn & Teach.

Caught up in the tragedy were two tiny victims, a three-week-old white baby who died when the car driven by his mother was stoned and a seven month old black infant who died after allegedly inhaling tear smoke. A 10-year-old Sebokeng boy was shot dead while chopping wood at his parents' home.

Makeshift barricades were set up in the main road near Sharpeville as youths prevented any vehicles entering the township.

The area became a battle zone with chaos and destruction rampant and a scenario reminiscent of the blitz. Sebokeng, once described as a thriving model township in which home-ownership and home improvement were well established, was left a riot-scarred disaster area.

Police reinforcements wearing camouflage uniforms and carrying semi-automatic rifles were brought in by the truckload, Sharpeville was sealed off and journalists were not allowed to enter.

A striking feature of the unrest, it was pointed out, was the varied ages of the people taking part. It was not the children's revolt of 1976; this time young children, teenagers and adult men and women joined in an across-the-board response to increased pressures and decreased quality of life.

In an unprecedented move, a group of senior cabinet ministers including Mr F.W. de Klerk, MP for Vereeniging and Minister of Internal Affairs, Gen Magnus Malan, Minister of Defence, and Dr Gerrit Viljoen, Minister of National Education and MP for Vanderbijlpark visited the area.

While concerned black and white organisations, editors and churchpeople called for redress of the grievances expressed so violently, law and order Minister Le Grange dismissed proposed rent increases as the real reason for the unrest and blamed "certain individuals and organisations".

The Azanian People's Organisation (Azapo) and the Federation of South African women (Fedsaw) called for restraint and expressed solidarity with the black masses involved.

In a statement, Azapo's Zithulele Cindi and Imram Moosa put the disturbances into a broader context.

"Events in the Vaal complex are not divorced from the countrywide upheavals against rent increases, the Local Authorities Act, school boycotts and the attendant demands and the rejection of sham new deal by the black people," they said.

"All these represent black dissent and opposition to all forms of legislation that is designed to dispossess them of their inalienable heritage – the land."

As the disturbances escalated, businesses closed down and people in the Vaal Triangle townships went without food because they could not get into "white" areas to shop.

Despite the compliance of the Indian community with a request to close all businesses in the area on Monday, September 3, in sympathy with the rent protests, many Indian businesspeople in the townships fell victim to mob anger. An estimated 42 Indian businesses were razed and about 20 families who lived on the same properties as their businesses were left homeless by rioters who looted the premises before setting them alight.

On September 4, 92 769 pupils stayed away from 14 secondary and 73 primary schools in Sharpeville, Evaton,

Sebokeng, Boipatong and Bophelong. They have never returned to school.

On September 6, a day of negotiations conducted at the Sharpeville township office while about 3 000 people waited outside, ended with the announcement that the controversial rent increases had been scrapped. A week after the first disturbances, several people were injured when tear smoke and rubber bullets were fired to disperse crowds after nearly 2 000 people who had gathered at the Roman Catholic Church in Sebokeng for a report-back meeting on demands they had made, were told the meeting had been banned.

A total of 141 people, including children whose ages ranged between nine and 16, appeared in the Sebokeng Regional Court after the meeting.

Along with the first funerals of the victims, came more police action.

In Evaton, police used tear smoke and sjamboks in clashes with mourners and more than 200 people were arrested.

In mid-September, 247 people appeared before a Vereeniging magistrate, sitting in the Vereeniging police station, on charges which ranged from infringement of the Internal Security Act to housebreaking and theft.

In Sebokeng, on September 23, nearly 600 of 2 000 mourners were arrested for "contravening certain restriction orders" that had been placed on the funeral of Mr Joseph Sithole.

Three days after they were arrested, 598 mourners (held under Section 30 of the Internal Security Act), who appeared in the Sebokeng Regional Court, were refused bail. They were remanded in custody until October 12, 16 days later, several were under the age of 12.

Two days after this first appearance, 58 of them, all under the age of 16, were released. In October, two weeks after their arrest, about 500 people charged with public violence appeared in the Vereeniging Regional Court.

A month later, eleven mourners under the age of 18 were still in jail in Vereeniging because their parents could not be traced.

At the end of October, the whereabouts of 31 of those arrested was still a mystery.

Violence flared again towards the end of September. Thousands were left stranded without transport and houses belonging to a businessman, an employee of the Orange/Vaal Development Board and a police constable were set alight in Sharpeville where police in hippos and vans patrolled the township.

The allegation by the Minister of Cooperation and Development and Education and Training, Dr Gerrit Viljoen that most people who died in the Vaal Triangle came from outside the area was denied.

On the first day of the new term, in October, about 93 000 pupils in the Vaal Triangle boycotted classes. They would not go back to school, they said, unless house rents were reduced to R30 a month.

On October 25, police in camouflage moved in with sjamboks after the funeral of a 16-year-old Sharpeville boy killed in the township's streets after the funeral of another victim.

Officials of the Orange/Vaal Development Board announced that black municipalities were planning to end



One of the many shops burnt in the Vaal Triangle; Photo, Learn & Teach

the intimidation of local residents by establishing their own para-military police forces.

Violence continued in one way or another through October, vehicles were looted and set alight, a shopping centre was plundered, a school gutted and a police van attacked and damaged.

Then came the army. On October 23, in an operation codenamed "Operation Palmiet" a 7 000 strong police and army force moved into Sebokeng at 2am. Troops searched all 19 500 houses in the area, some of them twice, and arrested 354 people before moving on to Sharpeville and Boipatong "because the manpower was available".

The house-to-house search in Sebokeng was aimed mainly at "revolutionaries" but none was found. The 354 people arrested were held under migration and influx control laws and other charges including possession of dagga, firearms, pornographic material and stolen goods.

Orange stickers carrying the worlds "Co-operation for peace and security" and "I am your friend, trust me" were stuck to houses and cars once they had been searched and checked and residents were also stamped with red dye.

In Sharpeville and Boipatong, residents queued in heavy rains for their "Peace and Security stamp" which allowed them to move "freely in the Vaal Triangle". Nine arrests were made in the two townships, all on criminal charges.

In Sebokeng, soldiers lined the streets distributing pamphlets calling on residents to support the bid to stop the unrest.

At the same time, in Sharpeville, 500 people marched on the township's Orange/Vaal Development Board offices.

Of the 307 people (out of a total of 358 held) who appeared in court following the crackdown, only six were charged with serious criminal offences. The rest were

charged with petty offences, mainly for transgressing migration and influx control laws, or for not having or failing to produce reference books.

On November 15, the Orange/Vaal Development Board (OVDB) cracked down on the Sebokeng Hostel arresting thousands of residents. Hundreds of board police backed by the SAP and SADF carried out the raid. The hostel accommodates more than 10 000 people, most of whom are migrant workers.

Some 2 300 inmates were arrested.

What was it all about and did the death and destruction make any impression on those who could make the only changes that would count?

On the face of it, it seems not. The same old scapegoats – agitators – are being cited in the same old way and, apart from a reprieve from the rent increases, there is little for the comfort of those who sought change.

The rents row simmers on amid threats of cutting off water and electricity supplies of those who do not pay and threats of arson and violence against those who do.

A leader in the Sowetan, September 6 read:

"The only lesson, and it is a very bitter pill to swallow, is that we are all going mad.

"We are mad because the signs have been plentiful that things would go awry. We are mad because at most conferences and cocktail parties the small talk is usually: When is the balloon going up? We are mad because this Government sees itself strong enough to contain such crisis situations. We are mad because we are allowing this thing to go on; to go on with our eyes wide open.

"So is it surprising . . . that the people in the Vaal Triangle went berserk?"

Is it?□