

# Stop the Hangings!



**The families of two death row prisoners wait to hear their sons were hanged.**

Photo: Afrapix

There are 290 people sitting on death row right now. These people have been called the 'living dead'. Every minute of their lives is dominated by the thought of death. They wait for death, but

until the moment that the rope is put around their neck by the hangman, they live with hope. Hope that they will be saved. Hope that they will continue to live.

Since 1980 more than 1 200 people in South Africa and the 'homelands' have been executed. South Africa has the second largest number of hangings in the world. More and more people are saying that this cold blooded murder must end and that hanging people is barbaric. Organisations are demanding that the death penalty be got rid of.

The State President, F.W. de Klerk, has declared a moratorium on all hangings. This means that nobody will be hanged from now until the government decides what to do about the death penalty. This makes it even more urgent that pressure be put on the government to get rid of the death penalty forever.

### **Who Is On Death Row?**

A study shows that most of the 'living dead' are black men under the age of thirty. They come from poor homes. They are either semi-skilled or unskilled. Most of them come from single parent families. Many of them are sitting on death row because they fought apartheid.

### **What Is It Like On Death Row?**

Most people who are sent to death row say that the first thing they notice is the noise - the sound of singing. The singing of the condemned. When someone is due to be hanged the next morning, the prisoners sing the whole night. All of the people waiting in this prison are waiting to die. They have to wear special clothes. One prisoner said: "Wearing those clothes means you can never be free. You think of those already dead who wore those clothes before you."

Michael Mambukwe lived on death row for 18 months. He was set free after another judge decided he had been wrongly sentenced. Michael spoke about death row in a meeting last year. He said: "Each and every minute of every day you are in torture. The warders say to you: 'You burn us outside, we finish you off here'. When you want to see a doctor he will tell you that you are here to die, not for treatment."

Michael said the words of Solomon Mahlangu who was hanged many years ago gave everyone on death row courage. Solomon Mahlangu said to his mother before he was

hanged: "Mama, tell my people I love them and my blood will nourish the tree of freedom."

"We must take our spear and cut that rope," says Michael.

Lloyd Vogelmann, a psychologist, described life on death row. He said the cell lights are on 24 hours a day. A few days before a prisoner is to be hanged, neck and body measurements are taken. 'The pot' is the place you are put into just before hanging. There is no toothpaste, toothbrush, no vest or underpants allowed. They want to make sure that you do not commit suicide. Prisoners talk and laugh a lot in the 'pot.'

Lloyd said: "Laughing is a way of forgetting. There are feelings of guilt about the family. There is a lot of crying from both sides during the last family visit. There are lots of words of love and apology. The prisoner is allowed the last tasty meal, unlike the one they have had before. Pretoria's gallows can hang 7 people at a time. The prisoners are lined up, the ropes are put around their necks and the trap doors open. An hour or so later there is a burial service for the family. Burial takes place in racially segregated parts of the cemetery. Even in death apartheid lives."

### **The People In Pain**

The families of death row prisoners spend sleepless nights thinking about loved ones who are waiting to die. For most of them Pretoria is too far and expensive to travel for a visit. And others find it too painful to look at their children for the last time.

MaDlomo describes a visit to her son as being very painful. She said: "I never know what to say to him. I never know whether I'll see him again. Each time I cannot look at him in the face. He tries to speak to me, but my voice does not come out. I love him."

Most people talk about how they try to stop their tears. They say crying makes people on death row feel guilty.

Another woman whose son was executed said: "Sometimes I do not sleep at all for the whole



**Relatives of people on death row attend a service at the Regina Mundi Church, Soweto in December 1989.**

Photo: Afrapix

night. I think of the person who actually hanged my son. I think of how much pain my son must have felt when he actually hanged. That must have been the most painful moment for him. Sometimes I dream of him. It feels terrible. After five years I still feel the same. I am bitter." The pain never ends and the bitterness grows.

### **A Sick Society With A Sick Legal System**

We live in a sick society. There can be no other explanation for a society that accepts killing so many people in this way. Numbers tell a story. From June 1982 to June 1983, of the 81 blacks who were convicted of killing whites, 38 were hanged. During the same time, 21 whites were convicted of murdering blacks, but not one was hanged. In a sick society the blood of one race is more precious than another.

All the judges who pass these death sentences are white. They do not know what it is like to be black in this country. And judges can make mistakes. Different judges can make different decisions about the same case, as with what happened to Michael. One judge sentenced him to hang to death, but another judge found him innocent. It is not easy to win the right to appeal against a sentence, as most requests are turned down. Most people do not even have proper legal representation. They do not have money.

Some judges are known for passing more death sentences than others. In fact some judges

have become known as 'the hanging judges'. A judge can sentence you to death even if you did not actually kill anybody. If you were part of a crowd which killed someone, even if you did not personally kill them, then you are said to have a purpose to kill. This law is called the 'doctrine of common purpose'. 53 year-old Evelina de Bruin and her 63 year-old husband together with other Uppington people are on death row because of the doctrine of common purpose.

Six people from Sharpeville were sentenced to death on the basis of the same law. They were reprieved after campaigns by South Africans and pressure from people and organisations in other countries.

### **Evelina de Bruin - The Only Woman On Death Row**

Evelina has 10 children. Mbulelo is 14 and Adelaide is 11. They are the youngest of her children. They are not even allowed to visit their mother because they are under age. Evelina cannot read or write. Therefore she cannot write letters to or read letters from her young children. They are already like real orphans even though Evelina has not yet been hanged.

Evelina's elder son Shadrack manages to visit his parents, although the Eastern Cape where the children live, is hundreds of kilometres away from Pretoria. He says: "When I come back from visiting my parents, the children want me to tell them everything that they said." It is hard

to imagine what it feels like to have both parents on death row. It is also hard to imagine how it feels to be on death row and not even see your children for the last time.

### **Rubbing Salt In the Wound**

The prison department has recently made visiting death row prisoners even more difficult. They have restricted visiting to certain days of the week, between 11 and 12 in the morning and 3 and 4 in the afternoon. A letter must be written to obtain permission for a visit. This way, it can take weeks and months before permission is obtained. Somebody could be hanged even before he or she gets a visit. This adds to the torture and pain that death row prisoners and their loved ones go through. These new visiting regulations are like rubbing salt in the wound of 'the living dead' and their loved ones.

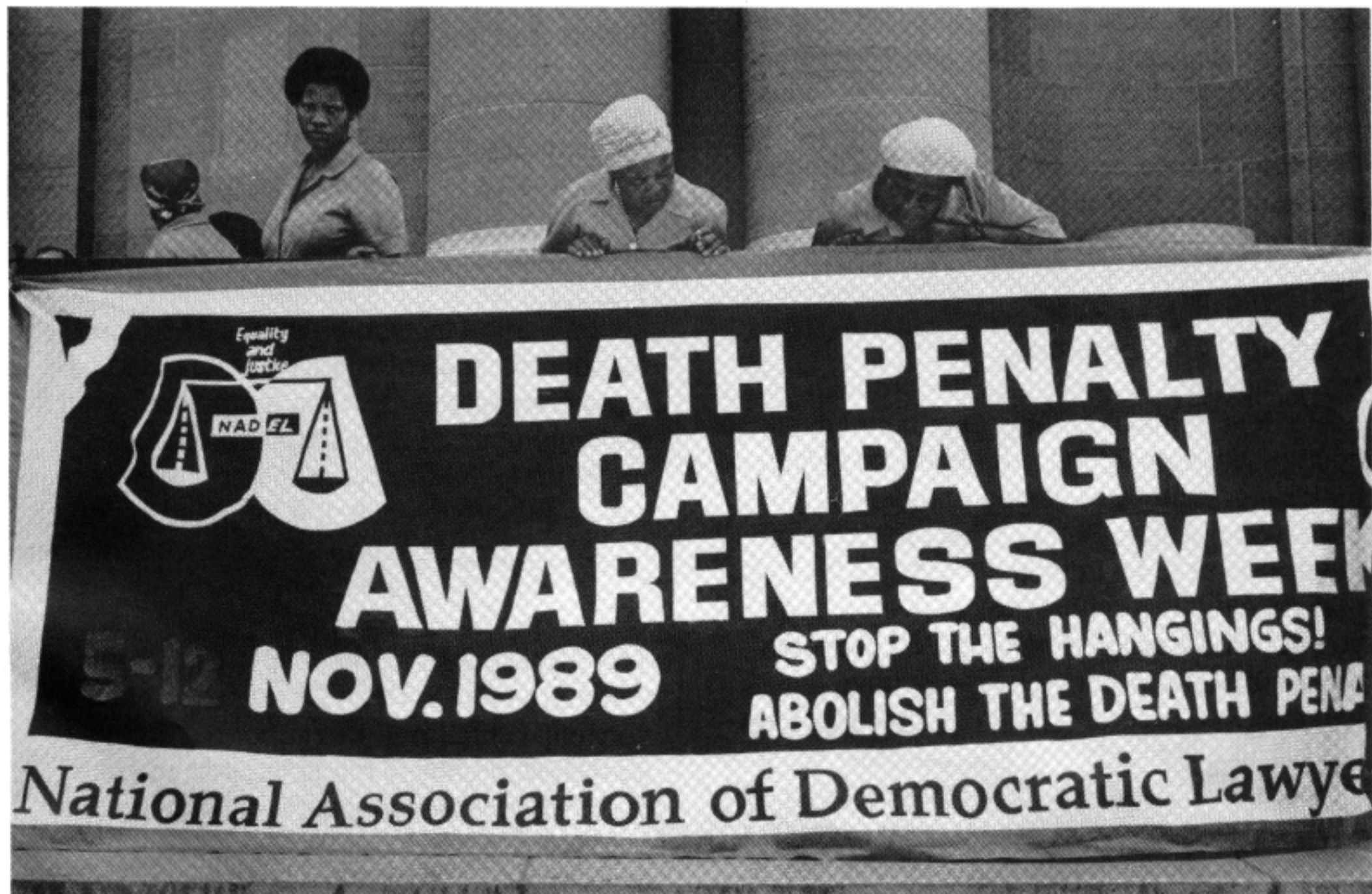
### **Stop The Hangings!**

Many individuals and organisations together with National Association of Democratic Lawyers have started a campaign to stop the

hangings. They want an end to the death penalty. A South African judge, Justice Didcott has come out openly against the death penalty. He says that passing the death sentence means "retaliating for an act of violence in a far more cold blooded way." This is true. Also, research has shown that death penalty does not reduce the crime rate.

Let us all fight to close down the Pretoria death factory. We need those people who are waiting to die to join in the struggle for a just South Africa. No-one should be hanged in a just society. Let us work with our organisations, churches and communities to reverse this killing culture. We need a living culture. We must stop the hangings.

Women's organisations in South Africa have come together to campaign to stop the hangings. They have a special focus on Evelina de Bruin, the only woman on death row. To find out more, write to: The Secretary of the Transvaal Region, Black Sash, P.O. Box 2827, Johannesburg, 2001, South Africa.



Let us join together and demand an end to the death penalty!

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