

Black Sash editorial

The Government has declared a State of Emergency in response to growing unrest in the townships. This unrest is an expression of black frustration and anger in the face of Government intransigence and neglect.

The State President views the violence and 'thuggery' as phenomena on their own — without apparent causes — and for which the State has had to show 'utmost patience'.

But those who have suffered the State's institutionalised violence (pass raids, forced removals, massacre of school children, detention, torture) have had to show far more than 'utmost patience'. The State President should look back over 37 years of National Party rule when he starts to apportion responsibility for the violence and 'thuggery'.

Our country is on the steep slide into anarchy and bloodshed. The townships are in turmoil. The administration of black areas is breaking down. The police are involved in doubtful actions which receive no criticism from the upper echelons. The army is caught up in having to fight fellow South Africans. This is indeed a description of civil war. Everything seems increasingly to be out of control, and the Government recalcitrantly evades the fundamental issue of giving blacks the vote.

Over the years moderation has failed to produce results. Again and again black peoples' rights to political association and participation in government have been smashed or denied. Freedom of association was inhibited, meetings and publications banned. Organisations were banned, their leaders detained, imprisoned and sometimes shot; currently, 52 of them are on trial for treason, leaving a vacuum at the top of an angry population.

In desperation people in the townships have resorted to organising mass boycotts, mass stay-aways and the like to make their grievances known. At each stage the State has responded with violence, but still the grievances remain.

Now time has run out for the National Party. The place where it confronts its black political opponents *en masse* is mainly in the townships. The interface between them is made up of township police, community councillors, beerhalls, administration board offices, government schools. Against these, as symbols and agents of their oppression, township residents, and youth in particular, have retaliated with petrol bombs, stones and looting.

Violence is becoming a way of life for a whole generation of young South Africans who are out of school, have no jobs, have nothing to lose, are frustrated and angry. They take their anger out on their surroundings and the people in their vicinity because the real culprits are not easily accessible.

A picture of lawlessness has emerged with the State's representatives, its police and community councillors, also taking part in the felony. This situation is aided and abetted by the government itself which for years has been abrogating the Rule of Law and denying the operation of due legal process. It has nurtured disrespect for the law itself by showing little respect for the fundamental tenet that justice must be seen to be done. Its many unjust and restrictive laws make this impossible for there is no way of administering unjust laws with justice.

Hideous things are done in the name of revenge on collaborators — or the 'maintenance of law and order'. The innocent suffer. Fear stalks the land. Violence begets more violence. In the absence of just laws, order can only exist through force, and this gets increasingly repressive with reactive violence and so on in an endless spiral.

And now the State has responded with an even more dangerous and repressive measure to add to the spiral. It has declared a State of Emergency. This gives its agents, from railway police through to the Minister of Law and Order himself, *carte blanche* to arrest, abduct, search, enter places without redress. Unlike the 1960 emergency regulations, the current ones include an indemnity clause (to prohibit prosecution of the State's agents) and an ouster clause (to prevent interdicts that restrain the police from any action under the emergency regulations). These regulations are a prescription for unrestrained State violence.

Why do authorities need indemnity? What can be worse than what they have already done? In the name of 'law and order' they have had the power to forcibly remove 3,5 million people and detain tens of thousands for their commitment to justice. They have shot scores of school children. Why does our government need further repressive powers?

John Vorster's prophetic 'too ghastly to contemplate' is before our eyes. This is not a time for increasing repression. This is a time for dramatic action on the part of the Government to release political leaders, to give franchise to the disenfranchised, hope to the hopeless, jobs to the jobless, mobility to the immobile, education to the illiterate, citizenship to those denied it, dignity to all, and security under the law to all its citizens.

It is a time to talk with all the people on a basis of equality. Nothing less will do. And it is a time which will not recur.