

# MASS ARRESTS AND CRIME

By JOEL CARLSON

**M**ASS ARRESTS and mass trials do not reduce crime. The mass arrests of Africans over the last four months have resulted in some 7,000 petty offenders being arrested. Yet a Police spokesman said after the last raid when more than 1,000 men and women and some juveniles had been arrested: "We have caught five or six housebreakers among the petty offenders". Any system which employs such large scale operations involving thousands of policemen, their vehicles and dogs, in apprehending half a dozen real criminals out of a thousand petty offenders is inherently bad and should not be tolerated.

Throughout the years half a million Africans have been arrested annually under the Pass Laws. This means that throughout South Africa some 1,500 Africans are arrested daily. What is new and startling about these arrests is that they are now carried out as large scale operations on a single day or night in a particular area. The present mass raids mean that the Pass Laws are being more stringently applied and that Pass Law arrests are taking place on an even greater scale than before.

To see these arrests in their right perspective it is essential to distinguish between criminals and petty offenders. It is common knowledge that real criminals have their papers in order. The authorities well know that this is the position. In fact the Department of Justice, the South African Police and the Bantu Affairs Department held consultations and issued a circular in 1954 stating :

- "1. It is common knowledge that large numbers of natives are daily being arrested and prosecuted for contraventions of a purely technical nature.
2. These arrests cost the State large sums of money and serve no useful purpose." (General Circular 23/1954).

It seems a blatant distortion of the facts when these same Authorities now say that arrests of petty offenders reduce crime.

Mass raids, mass arrests and mass trials have no place in civilised society. Laws in civilised countries are not framed with the intention of dealing with thousands of people at one time. Why then are mass pass raids being carried out on Africans in our Society? It is a fundamental principle of civilised society that the rights of the individual are sacrosanct. There are no individuals in a mass arrest. As people are arrested en masse there is no investigation of any crime or criminal as no attention can be paid to any individual case. It is therefore true to say with the authorities that these arrests cost the State large sums of money and serve no useful purpose.

The impression that mass raids have reduced crime may be illusory.

There are no published figures in South Africa to show that serious crime has decreased.

On the contrary, despite the number of petty offenders arrested, serious crime has increased over the years in South Africa, as in other countries overseas.

Fewer payroll robberies may have been committed in Johannesburg while police have been massed in the area, but then no real criminal would attempt to commit a crime under the very eyes of the police.

This means only that the criminals have scattered to commit their crimes elsewhere.

If the real robber is deterred from committing his crime by the presence of the police why is it necessary for them to arrest petty offenders?

Surely the answer is more policemen on the beat, all the time, everywhere.

These arrests do cause suffering and misery to thousands of people and breed contempt and disrespect for the law and the Police who enforce it. If the treatment meted out to black persons arrested in mass raids were ever to be applied to white people the country would burst with protest.

Who would tolerate the sight of batches of white people standing handcuffed together on street corners in the sight of the public for long periods without toilet facilities and without water or food? This is acceptable because it happens to black people.

Who would allow white people to be crammed into pick-up vans in such numbers so that all that can be seen are fingers clutching at the wire netting that surrounds the van. This passes unremarked because it happens to black people.

When prisoners arrive at a Police Station their personal possessions are normally handed to the Police for safe keeping and the prisoner is given a receipt. Is it conceivable that this proce-



sure can be strictly adhered to when dealing with hundreds of people at one time? Do the black man's possessions receive the same care as the white man's?

Do the Police take steps to inform the mother and father, the wife or the employer of the arrested man's whereabouts and can they do this for the hundreds of people imprisoned in a mass raid? If the Police cannot do this are any facilities provided to enable the black man to telephone his relatives or employer?

Crowded jails have suddenly to accommodate scores of extra prisoners. Can existing sanitary arrangements cope with the sudden influx? What provision is made for extra food and utensils? Are extra blankets available? Is there enough room in cells for prisoners to lie full length when they sleep? Prison Regulations provide for thirty-five square feet per person. Can these regulations be adhered to in conditions existing in a mass raid?

That mass arrests lead to mass trials is evident. Special courts are held in the cells of Magistrate's Courts and hard-worked officials have suddenly to cope with another one thousand cases. Is the accused given an opportunity of presenting his defence or communicating with his lawyer? Can justice really be done in twenty seconds?

Does this procedure instil a high regard for the white man's law and respect for the white man's justice?

It is clear that mass arrests do not reduce crime but they do increase suffering. Why then are mass arrests carried out? The reasons are by no means clear but white South Africa cannot justify them by claiming a mythical reduction in crime.

Are the mass arrests of Pass Law offenders designed to increase the supply of cheap labour to the farms? The Pass Laws undoubtedly serve this purpose and have done so for years. 1,500 Africans have been arrested daily and have always provided an adequate supply of cheap labour. Yet now there are mass arrests of Pass Law offenders. Do we need so much more cheap labour now or is there a need to convince an electorate now that crime has been reduced? Or is there some other reason so far unstated for mass raids, mass arrests and mass trials?

Are we being conditioned to accept this procedure as normal and regular? Will it then be extended to other sections of the community after it has been applied to Pass Law offenders?

For every injustice perpetrated in South Africa there is a rationalisation: Mass removal of people against their will is called slum clearance; Mass detention and banishment without any trial is said to be in the interests of State security or for the protection of the witnesses detained; And now mass arrests are carried out to reduce crime.

If justice is to be done mass arrests must be stopped.

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**F**OLLY is a more dangerous enemy to the good than malice. You can protest against malice, you can unmask it or prevent it by force. Malice always contains the seeds of its own destruction, for it always makes men uncomfortable, if nothing worse. There is no defence against folly. Neither protests nor force are of any avail against it, and it is never amenable to reason. If facts contradict personal prejudices, there is no need to believe them, and if they are undeniable, they can simply be pushed aside as exceptions. Thus the fool, as compared with the scoundrel, is invariably self-complacent. And he can easily become dangerous, for it does not take much to make him aggressive. Hence folly requires much more cautious handling than malice. We shall never again try to reason with the fool, for it is both useless and dangerous.