

jacarandas, casspirs and other signs of the time

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From Grahamstown a number of spindly roads fan out in an arc across the grey-green ridges and flatlands of the Eastern Cape, connecting the town to a number of small and widely scattered communities: moving clockwise from the south, Port Alfred and Kenton on the coast; Alexandria a little inland; Alicedale and Riebeeck East to the west; then Somerset East, Cookhouse, Bedford and Adelaide in a sweep to the north, and finally Fort Beaufort on the Ciskeian border.

They are tiny towns, their populations ranging from 1 500 to 12 000, largely unknown in other parts of the country, yet all intensely affected by the unrest that engulfs South Africa. Despite their smallness, their isolation and the endemic poverty, the level of politicisation among the black population of these towns is remarkably high. Although the two States of Emergency of the past 18 months have sent community organisations reeling, in recent years all have built up a full and active complement of civic, youth, student and women's organisations. Residents have staked their claims for real reforms, ones that would give them their rightful place in their country, through local campaigns — consumer boycotts, educational boycotts, stayaways — yet understand the national dimension to their struggle. On the other side of town, uneasy whites take shooting lessons and hire private guards, while sons and husbands join the commandos patrolling the dusty

township streets, and the security police go about their job of preserving the law and the order of the Republic with a ruthless zeal.

This is the area where the Albany Black Sash works. For many years it concentrated on the familiar problems that have constituted the workload of advice offices around the country: pass laws, UIF, housing, forced removals, pensions. In April 1985 some members decided to focus their energies more systematically on the cycle of community resistance and state repression that had been gathering momentum since 1984. All through the first State of Emergency and into the second, a small but extremely hardworking group of women has struggled to respond adequately to the escalating demands of a situation that more and more resembles a civil war. They collected statements and affidavits from the victims of repression; tried to direct those in need to the appropriate resource agencies, such as lawyers, doctors, detention support groups; organised a bail fund; attended the funerals that scarred the calendar with brutal regularity.

The volume of work was overwhelming, especially for a small group of volunteers, most of whom had full-time jobs and many other commitments. Early in 1986 it was decided to open a research office and to employ someone full-time to help coordinate and develop this work.

I arrived to open the office at

the beginning of August, when the second State of Emergency was nearly two months old. By then three key members of Black Sash — Priscilla Hall, Ann Burroughs and Louise Vale — were in detention. Massive detentions in the outlying towns had effectively severed the always vulnerable communication links between people there and Grahamstown. Community leaders not in detention were in hiding. Nobody was sure what could be published or what the consequences of reporting on events might be. Grahamstown's own black townships, geographically linked to the town in a way that apartheid had managed to destroy in so many other places, were virtually no-go areas for non-residents, sealed off by the massive presence of army and police and patrolled with a frightening thoroughness by the newly constituted municipal police force of the Rini Town Council (as the black local authority had now come to be called). Army and police Casspirs were a daily sight in the High Street; roadblocks a routine feature of travel.

Similar conditions prevailed in other parts of the country, of course. What adds a particular ferocity to the situation in the Eastern Cape is the smallness of the communities involved, their isolation from the resources and support networks operating in the larger centres, as well as the deep-seated frontier mentality of most white inhabitants. Repression in the Eastern Cape has a frighteningly personal dimension to it. It is not an easy place in which to hide.

My job over the past five months has been, essentially, to try to systematise and to continue the monitoring work already started — in a climate which makes all non-state-controlled information-gathering and dissemination suspect. My task has been defined as four-fold: ongoing monitoring of events; documentation; information and analysis; and liaison with other groups with similar objectives. While material collected over the past two years cries out for detailed analysis, the continuing

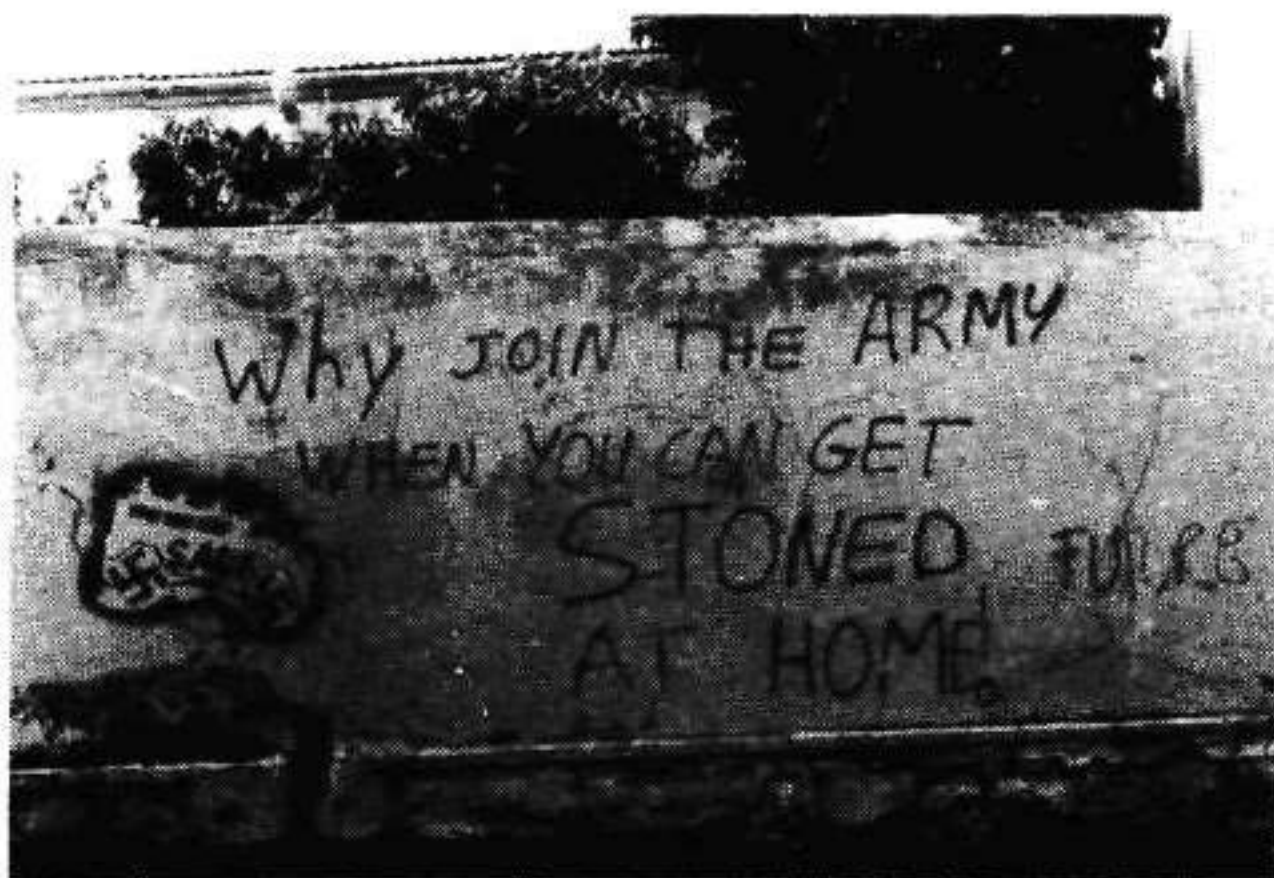
crisis takes up much time: a child detained, an alleged assault by a municipal policeman, an attack on a suspected police informer by angry youths. Even when everything appears quiet, a sense of imminent crisis lurks in one's mind.

We now have a functioning office, a word processor and a car. Statements continue to be collected and processed and such reports as come our way recorded. We try to keep track of names and numbers, and, where possible, to remind the world of what is happening. (The latest emergency regulations on press censorship are deeply disturbing; they strike at the heart of much of our work.) Although it is sometimes hard to accept the relevance of documentary work in times like these, the archivist and historian in me knows that it is important that a record of the terrible things that people are enduring in the townships and in the jails should be preserved.

In the midst of all this tension and uncertainty, white Grahams-town goes about its daily business with a blinkered determination to pretend that all is under control, which is often difficult to comprehend. Ignorance is compounded by fear and by greed. Part of our task has been to try to penetrate the defences, and to make the white community aware of what is happening down the road — through letters to the press, statements, a pamphlet for the 'Free the Children' campaign. What the impact of this is, is hard to assess. It seems that a siege mentality is taking hold. Neighbourhood meetings called to establish neutral, non-political community guard squads who will patrol their own suburbs in close liaison with the S A Police are well-attended. On the surrounding farms, the security fences and security lights are going up.

In the meantime, the local paper reports on commemorative dinners and craft shows, and 'Fright Night' plays at His Majesty's. At times it is hard to straddle the contradictions. Can spring really be so exuberant during a State of Emergency — can jacaranda blooms be so blue? □

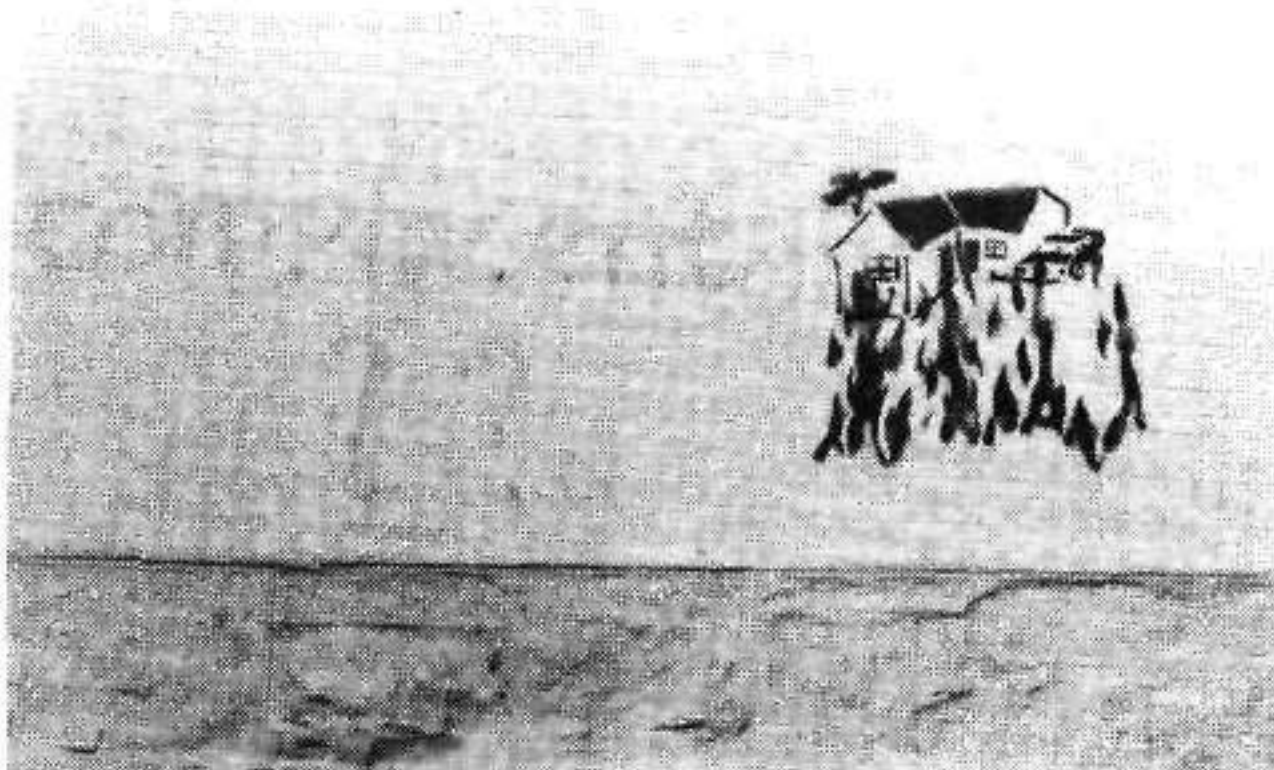
More signs of the time: local graffiti



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