

# 1986 port elizabeth and uitenhage removals

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Port Elizabeth and Uitenhage have, until now, been spared most of the harsh realities of forced removals. The implementation of 'orderly urbanisation' in 1986 has changed all this.

These two centres, with Despatch in-between, are undergoing a 'sterilise and sanitise' programme which involves the uprooting and removal of thousands of township residents to areas less visible, less accessible, more easily policed and controlled, and which is calculated to break up existing community organisations and relationships.

Some 40 000 shack dwellers from Langa and Blikkiesdorp in Uitenhage and Despatch Township have been moved to sites in KwaNobuhle — an hour's walk from Uitenhage. In Langa, strong and well organised resistance to the move was whittled away by the detention of leaders under the State of Emergency. It was further eroded by a court order compelling some of the residents of Kabah (an area of Langa) to move. Nightly harassment by KwaNobuhle Town Council officials, for weeks on end, completed the demoralisation of the community. These people are now housed in tents or rebuilt shacks in a massive resettlement area which is inadequately supplied with basic services and far from work, schools and medical facilities.

This operation was termed 'a voluntary removal' by the authorities. Operation Real South Africa (a PFP action group), which conducted a survey in the area, found that without exception those who had been moved had done so totally against their will.

In mid-November 1986 the Black Sash Advice Office in Port Elizabeth received a call from the Red Location community.

Red Location, one of the oldest established areas in New Brighton, is a 'prime site': it is next to the New Brighton station and is spacious and level. Although water and sewerage facilities are utterly inadequate, this is because of departmental neglect, not because of difficulty of access. Many residents have lived there for thirty years or more, and shacks belonging to their children and grandchildren are attached to the main dwellings.

Threats of the impending removal, by order of the Ibhayi Town Council, were levelled at

the community from trucks with loudspeakers in September and again in early November 1986. They were told that Red Location was 'dirty' and that they would be better off in a new place.

On 14 November, certain residents were advised that 'unauthorised structures' must be removed in terms of Section 3B(1) of the Illegal Squatting Act. Eviction and relocation in Motherwell, a huge new township/resettlement area 20 km north of Port Elizabeth, faced 450 of the 1 370 families.

The people of Red Location got busy at once: a petition bearing more than 4 000 signatures was sent to the state president. An ORSA survey of 158 households in Red Location revealed that almost everyone was opposed to the move. Interviews with the appropriate officials took place but the Ibhayi Town Council would not relent.

The authorities sealed off Red Location, declaring it an 'unrest area' and a 'military zone', and sending in an increased military force to patrol the streets. It was announced that court orders would be obtained if residents refused to move.

An uneasy calm hung over Red Location. On 1 December came a surprise reprieve: people would not be moved, but would be given temporary homes in the area while better homes were built. Ibhayi Town Council has since announced a three-phase plan to redevelop Red Location: erect temporary houses in an adjacent area; move shack dwellers into them, and then proceed with the redevelopment plan. Red Location residents, while greatly relieved, remain on the alert. Some signs of vigilante action in the area are being monitored.

On the other side of Port Elizabeth, Walmer Township has been assured that, after many years of threatened removal, it will be permitted to remain. Here too, however, lodgers and shackdwellers have received eviction notices.

On the far side of Zwide lies the sprawling shack township of Little Soweto with its dense population of over 120 000. Will this be next on the 'orderly urbanisation' agenda? Will they too be forced to exchange a shack in town for one that fits in with the government's 'sanitise and sterilise' ideal? □

*'I am too old to start a new life in a new place. I want to die here in the place I know.'* —

*Resident of Red Location, pictured below.*



BLACK SASH ARCHIVES