

This festering sore — and politics only a part

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IT is gratifying to note that commentators in the media and elsewhere appear to be at last accepting that the violence around Pietermaritzburg is something more complicated and deep-seated than simply conflict between rival political organisations.

Until fairly recently there was a tendency to portray the conflict as direct competition between Inkatha and the United Democratic Front/Cosatu, the more partisan sections of the media casting it unmistakably in terms of "goodies versus baddies."

Regrettably, this has been compounded by superficialities from prominent persons in Pietermaritzburg and elsewhere which were no doubt intended in good faith but have been unhelpful in getting to the root of the problem.

The Inkatha Institute (which is an autonomous research body) is the only organisation I am aware of which has attempted serious research into the causes of the Pietermaritzburg violence, using sociologically accepted methods.

In early December last year the Institute sent a research team into the troubled areas to start from scratch, ignoring the various issues, causes and quick cures that had been so spontaneously produced by a vast number of publications.

Using recognised techniques to gather and verify information within a multi-faceted framework (economic, social, political and psychological) and working under very difficult conditions, the team was able to produce a preliminary report after four weeks' research.

This accepted that the conflict probably was triggered by Inkatha/UDF antagonism, but pointed out that socio-economic conditions in the area were such that conflict would have been the likely outcome, whatever actually ignited it.

OFFICIAL figures give a population of 193 400 for the area. This number is considered to be grossly misleading. No update has been conducted since 1986 and no account has been taken of the squatter settlements. It is estimated that the actual population of these areas is now between 350 000 and 400 000. Academic sources have supported this claim.

Secondly, that events had over-

taken the political power struggle in the area and the main struggle was now being conducted by exploitative criminal elements and a large body of alienated youth showing symptoms of a frenzy syndrome which has been observed in similar situations in South Africa and worldwide.

Because this preliminary research indicated that events in the Pietermaritzburg area are no longer in the hands of the leadership of either Inkatha or the UDF, I expressed caution against too much being expected from a widely welcomed



Courtesy The Daily News

The Chief Minister, Inkosi Buthelezi, inspects a passing-out parade of KwaZulu Police. The KwaZulu Government (and people living in the strife-torn areas) have demanded a greater peace-keeping role for the KwaZulu Police



Courtesy The Daily News

Soldiers give sweets to a toddler in the Pietermaritzburg area

“peace agreement” in early January. I was unfortunately proved correct.

A second report is now being compiled, and already some interesting information comes to light. The perpetrators of aggression are almost entirely in the 15-24 age group; this group constitutes about 21 percent of the area's population; of youths of schoolgoing age, about 77 percent are not in school; about 80 percent of the whole group are unemployed.

It seems from this that about 80 000 youths who are at a critical direction-forming point of their lives are goalless, bored and more often than not hungry. Research so far suggests that their attitudes correspond with attitudes discovered in studies elsewhere in conflict situations, internationally as well as at KTC/Inyanga and in the Eastern Cape.

The indications are that, as in similar situations elsewhere, the youth of the troubled areas find the violence has given them some purpose in life, a relief from the painful emptiness they have grown up with. While some use the conditions of conflict to gain materially at somebody else's expense, a surprisingly large proportion do not have this motive at all.

The “gang” has become uppermost in their minds, it is like a tragically realistic game of “cowboys and Indians”.

A significant cross-section of youth was closely questioned. It transpired that although their gangs often use the names “Inkatha” or “UDF”, they in fact most often have no ideological understanding of these movements and no formal connection with them at all. They might just as well call themselves “cowboys” and “Indians”.

Because they are strongly territorial, with the enlargement of territory the overriding aim, confrontation is constant and bloody. But, according to the researchers, control of an area by a particular gang is no indication at all that it is supported by the residents. They put up with whoever is conducting the reign of terror because they have no choice.

The research points to a combination of the activities of the gangs, criminal activity and (to a lesser extent) real Inkatha/UDF competition as the cause of the violence and the self-perpetuating violence due to retribution. The Institute's research

supports a South African Police contention that a significant proportion of the acts of violence and the nature of the killings is not typical of a power struggle. The indiscriminate nature of the attacks and the high incidence of very old, very young and female victims rather indicate a senseless nihilism.

I visited the area myself at the height of the violence and was appalled at how sparse the South African Police presence was. This appears to have been at least partly rectified.

In the medium term, further research should be conducted into the needs of the area because until the people are lifted out of their plight, the conditions making for violence will continue. Pietermaritzburg has no doubt already suffered as an industrial growth point as a result of the violence.

All who have the city's interests at heart should be prepared to contribute to treating the socio-economic causes of this festering sore, and thereby to giving the youth a more purposeful environment and the opportunity to establish a more civilised value system.