

# Violence in South Africa: on the increase in the 1990s

*Gillian Eagle*

South Africa is a violent country. The state has a long history of brutally suppressing opposition to apartheid. Particular periods stand out in this history, including the deaths of numerous township youth during the uprising of 1976, repression in the Vaal in 1984/85 and the introduction of a "State of Emergency" in 1985.

## An Increase in Political Violence

The unbanning of the ANC, PAC and SACP in February 1990, the release of Nelson Mandela and other political leaders and F W de Klerk's stated commitment to political change introduced a wave of euphoria and optimism across the country. There was an expectation of a marked decrease in violence, both on the part of the state and its opponents. However, this dream of peace has been transformed into a nightmare as South Africa has moved into a period of unprecedented violence. A comment by the ANC secretary general, Cyril Ramaphosa, following the Boipatong massacre, highlights the gravity of the situation: "more have died since De Klerk become president, less than three years ago, than in forty years of Nationalist Party rule".

The figures for deaths due to political violence from 1985 to 1992 read as follows:

1985	879
1986	1 198
1987	661
1988	1 149
1989	1 403
1990	3 699
1991	2 240
1992	1 181 (first six months)

This violence can be linked to the apartheid system, but there are also a number of specific factors responsible for the current upward spiral. Various parties and organisations are attempting to increase their political influence. This is a feature of the much publicised ANC-Inkatha conflict. There have been allegations of a third force, linked to the SAP, SADF and the government, which is acting to swell

conflict and discredit the ANC. The white right wing is attempting to hold back political change and re-establish white domination. Violence also stems from the frustration of the dispossessed, particularly the black youth, over the lack of anticipated gains in education, housing and material wealth.

## **More Assaults, Rapes and Murders**

In addition to the escalation in political violence, there is a large increase in a range of other forms of violence, including criminal, domestic and sexual attacks.

Researchers from the Project for the Study of Violence, based at the University of the Witwatersrand, cite a figure of approximately 15 000 murders annually, or 42 per day. They compare this figure to that of the United States, generally accepted as the most violent country in the western world: "In terms of murder per 100 000 people, the figure in South Africa is 49, which is six times that of the United States, which is between 8 and 9 per 100 000."

Furthermore, during 1991, there were 22 765 reported rapes in South Africa, 129 626 reports of assault and 1 556 reports of ill-treatment of children (excluding sexual offences). The number of rapes increased by 12% from 1990 to 1991.

## **All South Africans at risk**

The elderly, women and children are vulnerable and disempowered and are thus easy targets, but violence is not restricted to these groups. Criminal violence directed at the white middle-class is increasing. Police personnel, seen as agents of state repression, are also targets. It seems that very few people are safe from the threat of violence of some kind, although black, working class, township residents appear to have borne the brunt of mass attacks, both within their communities and on public transport, in train massacres and taxi wars.

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