

TOWNSHIP UNREST AND HEALTH CARE

The recent unrest in various townships around the country has cast some light on the relationship between the health services and the South African Police.

Victims of unrest often do not attend hospitals or clinics, even if they need medical attention. Township residents say that, in fact, most unrest victims do not go to hospitals for treatment, if they can avoid it. That is because they fear being arrested and harassed by the police while they are in hospital. A number of statements which we are reprinting here, indicate that this is a very real fear. Others do not go to hospital for treatment because, during times of unrest, ambulance services are often suspended, and people cannot get transport to the hospitals.

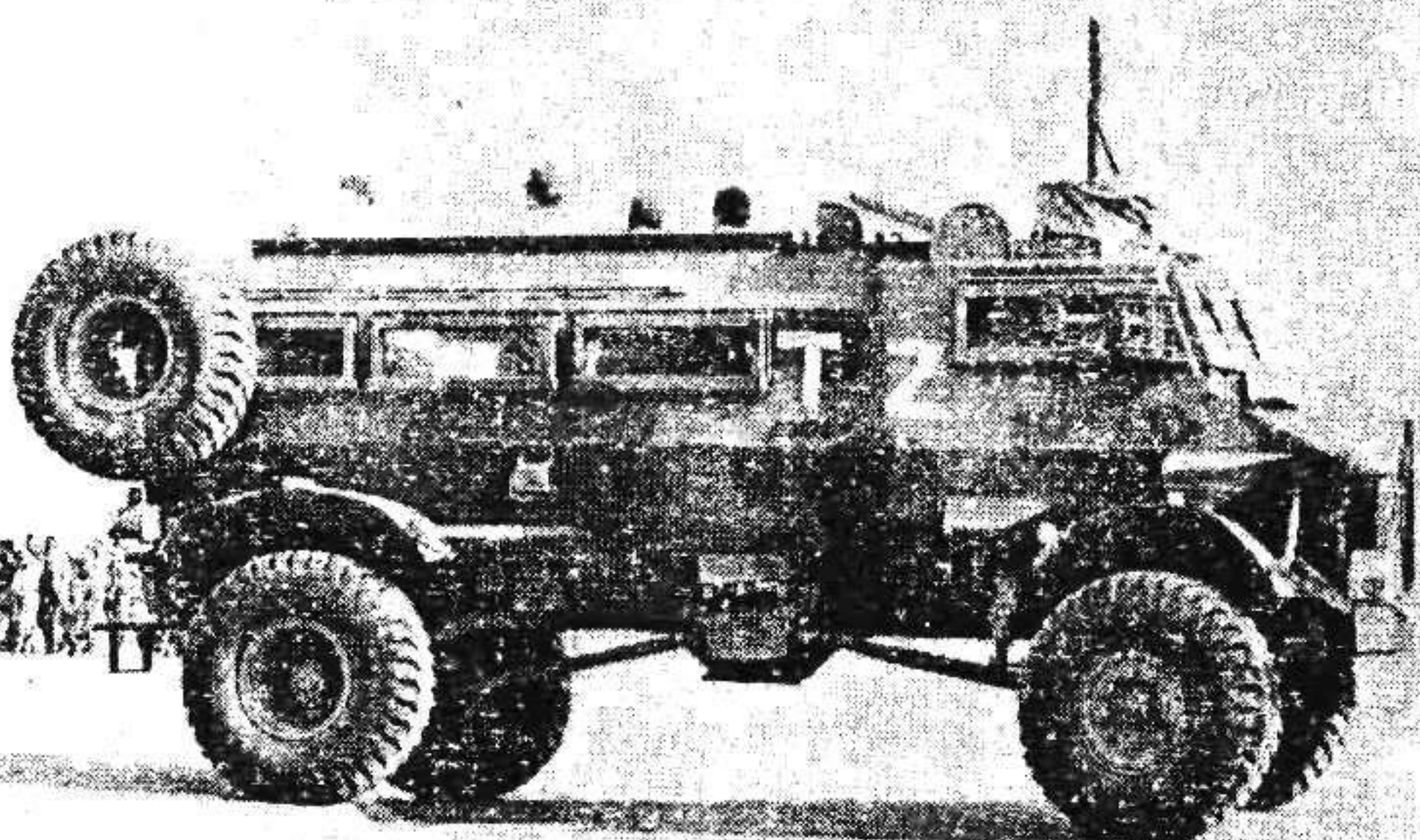
Organisations are beginning to respond to unrest in the townships. People are documenting their experiences and recording the abuses they have suffered. In this way, they can hopefully make use of the limited rights they have: lay charges against policemen assaulting them, be granted visits to detained family members and deliver food parcels for them, trace missing family members, get referred to doctors for medical treatment, and apply for sick pay and UIF money. In some townships, people have made contact with progressive health worker organisations like NAMDA and the Health Workers' Association, to help provide appropriate health care in times of crisis.

Those unrest victims who do go to hospitals, often get inadequate medical treatment. In many cases, their conditions are neglected. Also, victims of unrest are often not informed of their rights to lay charges, nor of their right to get sick pay while they are in hospital.

Experiences of unrest victims in Vaal townships

Sipho from Sebokeng

Sipho was coming home to Sebokeng from work, when he saw that people had gathered around Texido Supermarket. He also saw a hippo parked round about 500 metres away from the supermarket. When he saw the hippo, it was too late to turn back and find another way home. So he crossed the road. At that moment, people who had gathered around the supermarket ran away in all directions. The police shot from the hippo. Sipho was hit by buckshot in the back of his left lower leg. His leg was riddled with pellets. The shots were fired from the hippo, about 500 metres away from him on the other side of the road. He made his way to a row of houses nearby, where he found someone to take him to Sebokeng Hospital by car. During his second week in hospital, two plainclothed policemen came to him and took a statement from him. After that, the South African police came round to take the names of those people who had been shot. People in the hospital were harassed by the police.



After three weeks in hospital, Siphos left lower leg was amputated below the knee.

Siphos spent three months in hospital; he was discharged on 12 December 1984. It was only much later, on 1 April 1985, that he was able to return to work.

Now he is fighting for his UIF payment. In doing so, he is being referred from one department to another.

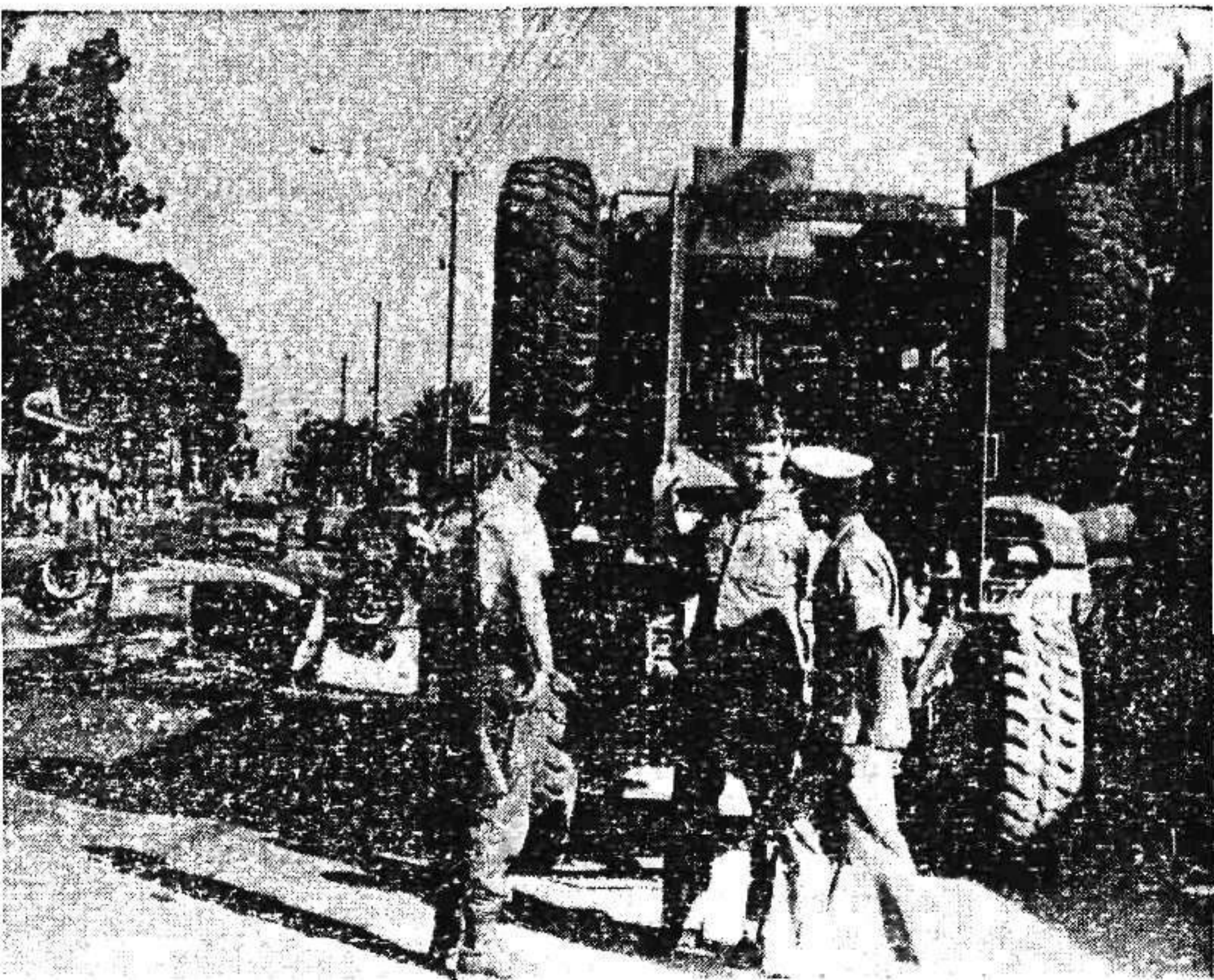
Mrs X about her son Moses from Sebokeng

Moses is seventeen years old and lives in Sebokeng. On 3 September 1984, he was together with two friends in a back street, when police arrived and fired teargas. Teargas got into his eyes and he ran to a tap to wash his eyes. But he did not get to the tap. On his way to the tap, just as he went around the corner, he was hit by bullets in his eyes. One of the friends accompanying him ran into a house. The other one went to call Moses's mother. When she arrived, she saw her son lying on the ground. She thought he was dead. The two boys who had been with him, helped to pick him up. At that moment, the police appeared and started hitting the boys. The police also started kicking Moses, who was lying on the ground. Mrs X interfered and asked the police to stop kicking her son. The police told her to get him to hospital. She insisted that the police take him to hospital. Instead, they took him to the police station. At that stage, everyone thought he was dying. Mrs X herself was loaded into the back of a hippo to go with her son. When she arrived at the police station, she found that he was still alive. An ambulance took him to hospital. He was examined by doctors and it was found that he had nine bullets in his chest and in his head. He had an operation to get all the bullets out. Afterwards, he was transferred to a ward, where two policemen stood around his bed for two weeks.

He was discharged from hospital at the end of February. As a result of the injuries he sustained from police bullets, he is now blind.

Jabu from Sharpeville

At a funeral on 2 September 1984, police followed the funeral procession from the graveyard. A helicopter was flying very low above the mourners, and fired teargas. Jabu could not see where the policemen were going. He was suddenly attacked with sjamboks. A rubber bullet grazed his back. He fell. Then five policemen came, kicked him, and hit him with sjamboks. In the process of being sjambokked, he was hit on his left eye. He was loaded onto a police truck and taken to the police station, where he laid a charge against the police. The police took him to Sebokeng Hospital. On the first day in hospital, he was in a ward together with other people injured during the unrest. For that day, he was 'guarded' by police. On the second day, he was transferred to a ward with other unrest victims. In this ward, three policemen kept a constant presence.



He was discharged from hospital after three days. During his stay in hospital, his eye was never properly examined. All he was given for his eye was an ointment for the swelling to go down. He lost sight on his left eye as a result of being sjambokked by the police.

C about a girl Elizabeth from Tumahole

On Saturday, 23 March, Elizabeth was shot by police. She has got eighteen bullets in her body. She was taken to Tumahole Hospital. But by Tuesday, she had not received any treatment. So on Wednesday, her parents took her to a private doctor for treatment. This doctor sent her back to hospital.

Most of the people interviewed have since visited the aid clinics of the Vaal Information Service. They are getting legal and medical advice. But what is more important: these people themselves have learnt from their experiences, and are now organised to help other people with similar problems. They are making the help that they have received into a service to their own communities.