

# White lives tip the balance once again



Violence in all its brutal manifestations continues to remain the greatest single threat to the derailment of renewed negotiations. The reaction in official quarters to the recent tragic attack on whites highlights a fundamental problem in the long road towards reconciliation and peace in South Africa.

Violence, wherever and whenever it occurs, must be condemned without qualification. No effort should be spared in bringing criminals to book who are responsible for the ongoing massacres. No political party can be allowed to be ambiguous in its reaction. There should be no room for double-talk on the question of violence. This is in particular something which the Pan Africanist Congress will have to resolve if it is to participate meaningfully in the current negotiations.

But the major problem is not the outcry over the recent attacks, nor the demand that swift action must be taken by the police. The problem lies in the different reaction by the white establishment to the thousands of equally tragic deaths in black townships. There too, little children have died and women have not been spared.

The response by the rightwing and the AWB in particular, comes as no surprise. They are apparently oblivious to the killing of blacks, but the killing of whites demands, in their terms, revenge. The usual sterile outbursts by spokesmen on behalf of the Conservative Party also come as no surprise. It is a matter of deep concern, however, when the State President calls a special session of parliament to debate the violence.

His decision to mobilise the army and his call for a debate on capital punishment clearly expresses his concern about the ever-increasing spiral of violence. This in itself is not necessarily wrong. But it is more than a coincidence that his most urgent action to date regarding killings has been immediately after whites have been added to the long list of deaths.

It is this strong reaction – in itself is commendable – which highlights a serious problem in South Africa and which could lead to considerable trauma in the future. It suggests to black South Africans that white lives are more sacred than black lives.

Understandably this will be strenuously denied. It will be argued that the State President has, on numerous occasions, made it clear that his concern is for the safety and security of all South Africans. It will also be argued that the South African Police and the South African Defence Force are there to protect the security of all South Africans. But all these protestations fly in the face of the different reaction to the slaughter of thousands of blacks, including women and children, to that of the killing of three whites. He has yet to make it clear that every single human life is sacred.

This contradiction points to a much greater problem and that

is the need for healing in our nation. Reconciliation is necessary, but it is very costly. A place to begin would be for white South Africans to begin to recognise that their fellow black South Africans have borne the brunt of the violence, not merely over the last few years, but over many decades. It is urgent for all political parties as well as the media to show the same compassion and anguish and anger over the death of one black person as they do concerning the death of one white person. It is indisputable that that is not the case now.

It will be argued further that the State President had to take tough action because he has a very precarious hold on his immediate constituency, namely future white voters. Further, that whites are alarmed, concerned and fearful of the future and he had to demonstrate that he would do everything in his power to ensure their protection. This, in cynical political terms, makes sense. But in terms of the healing of a nation it makes no sense at all.

In the first place, it suggests that Mr De Klerk is particularly concerned about the white constituency and yet he is after all the State President of South Africa, which includes all South Africans.

In the second place, it establishes a very dangerous precedent. Is it suggested for a moment that Mr Mandela, for example, should be concerned only about the deaths of black South Africans on the assumption that this is his immediate constituency? In particular, what does this say about the future?

In a new South African government, there is no doubt that blacks will be in the majority. If violence were to continue, is it assumed that a black majority government will be much more concerned to take decisive action against the killings of blacks and be less concerned about the killing of whites? Even the suggestion is horrifying and unacceptable. Yet, it is assumed that this is acceptable now.

South Africa is in transition. The attitudes and actions of the present authorities will set precedents for the future. The response to violence is a moral issue, but it is also a question of strategy.

There are many problems which have to be resolved through negotiation. But the problem of the reaction to violence is one which is not going to be solved by a handful of political leaders. It has to do with the attitude and the reaction of all South Africans. But it would help if those in charge today would lead by example so that those in charge tomorrow will be even-handed in their concern for peace, safety and security for all South Africans – be they black or white.

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