

Monitors join forces against violence – and for peace



On July 24, more than 90 delegates, representing over 30 violence monitoring organisations, came together under the auspices of Idasa in Johannesburg. This workshop arose out of the continuing concern relating to the endemic violence which has gripped South Africa.

They met against a sombre background. More than 60 lives had been lost since the indiscriminate and mindless violence which occurred in Boipatong; the statements made by political leaders indicate the lack of trust between the major actors who once had gathered around the negotiation table at Codesa; that very morning, the newspapers covered the story of the breakdown in the Saccola/Cosatu negotiations and it seemed that a general strike was now inevitable.

The delegates had come knowing that despite the best intentions of many, we have failed to quell the violence. A Peace Accord had been signed, peace committees and dispute resolution committees had been set up, Codesa had been well established, there had been some change in the attitude and behaviour of law and order forces, many monitoring groups were actively at work, but the violence continues.

Commitment

The same day, newspapers carried prominent reports of the arrival of the UN mission under the leadership of Mr Cyrus Vance (Idasa has consistently called for international intervention and we are particularly glad that the Secretary-General has nominated Mr Vance as the leader of that mission, not only because of his brilliant and professional record but also because he has been president of the Friends of Idasa in the United States for more than three years and has therefore been in very close touch with the struggle for democracy in South Africa).

In short, delegates from monitoring groups throughout the country realised that they faced an awesome task. But what was encouraging, throughout the meeting, was the recognition that civil society needed to play a significant role in combating violence. Also encouraging was the prevailing mood of realism, concern and deep commitment. After initial papers were delivered by various speakers from different organisations directly involved in violence monitoring, the delegates moved into five mission groups. The objective of the commission was to develop a proposal – based on the experience of the members of the group and models available to them – for the most effective monitoring programme in the present context.

At the end of the day, in the reports which came from the five groups, it was clear that despite many differences there was a clear commitment towards the possibility of setting up a national monitoring organisation which could co-ordinate efforts but also take monitoring beyond current work – in the hope that individuals and groupings would be more effectual, not only in stopping the violence but working creatively for peace.

Teeth

Definitions were sought – is monitoring merely observation? Does it fall into the realm of mediation and conciliation? Can monitoring embrace facilitation or does the one rule out the

other? Where should the primary focus of monitoring groups fall? Should it be on the police and other security forces or should it involve all parties concerned in the violence? In particular, how can monitoring groups take their work beyond merely observing and recommending, and begin to “have teeth” so that recommendations can be implemented?

A further question concerned the relationship between the National Peace Accord and the work of monitoring groups. Obviously there has to be co-ordination, co-operation and communication links but in order to do the job adequately and effectively, it was the general view of the workshop that a national monitoring organisation should be independent of the National Peace Accord. Whilst recognising the important role of the international community, it was also stressed that, in the final analysis, the responsibility for on-going peace was very much that of South Africans themselves. In some instances the international community could gain access which would be normally denied to local groups. Very close liaison was therefore important between those involved inside South Africa and those who come from outside.

Proposal

In the concluding discussion it was recommended that Idasa should take the findings of the workshop one step further. Idasa will draw up a firm proposal based on the discussions and recommendations which will be submitted to each organisation represented. A special task group, with regional, specialist and political relevance, will be set up, and once the final proposal for a national monitoring organisation has been confirmed by the organisations concerned it will be presented to the National Peace Committee, along with recommendations regarding logistics and budget.

Boipatong was a scene of bloody carnage, but the tragedy of what occurred that night has galvanised both South Africa and the international community into new action and new determination to stop the violence. It brought about a meeting at the Security Council of the United Nations. It resulted in a mission being sent from the UN under Mr Vance, who will, after in-depth discussion and observation, make further recommendations to the Security Council, which will almost inevitably lead to an international monitoring group in South Africa. It also brought together more than 30 monitoring groups which have been active in South Africa, but which have felt impotent in their inability to get to grips with the violence.

If the joint efforts of the international and national monitoring forces can save one life, can create a more peaceful climate, then even the tragedy of Boipatong will not be one merely of revulsion and horror but also one of outrage and more determined action to make further Boipatongs impossible.

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