

# Mirror, mirror, off the wall?

The perception that violent crime directed against white people is out of control in the Transkei does not reflect a factual situation, but one constructed by the media, argues ZOLA SONDLLO.

THE PERCEPTION of Transkei as a hotbed of racist criminals has its roots in the Goldstone Commission finding that the homeland was being used by Apla, armed wing of the PAC, as a springboard for attacks on members of the South African Police and South African Defence Force and white civilians in South Africa.

This soured relations between Transkei and the rest of South Africa and, as a result, SADF troops set up posts on all roads leading to Transkei "to protect South African citizens from cross-border attacks". Transkei military ruler Bantu Holomisa then put his troops on alert, ordered road-blocks set up throughout the homeland, and a war of words ensued.

The South African Embassy in Transkei warned travellers and tourists to avoid Transkei if possible and cautioned those who did visit the area. The media were alerted and the East London-based *Daily Dispatch* responded particularly vociferously, its Umtata Bureau invoking and reproducing prevailing conceptions of the wave of "racist crimes" committed in the Transkei.

Sensational news headlines during the first week of the blockade emphasised the "seriousness of the situation". Certain crimes were highlighted as instances of the racist upsurge engulfing the homeland.

However, the supposed enormous increase in "racist crime" given splash coverage was not reflected in documented cases. The increase was constructed by the media. There was not a marked increase in incidents of crime; rather there was a marked increase in coverage of criminal incidents.

The opinions of people in the area shed light on the agenda-setting powers that the media wield. Letters from whites poured in to the *Daily Dispatch*. Some expressed fear and horror. Others, like the white woman whose letter was printed on 7 May, accused the South African Embassy of being trapped in a "laager mentality". She said that a major factor behind the warnings issued by the embassy was "white fear based on a distrust of black people".

After the lifting of the blockade, media coverage of apparently racist attacks decreased drastically. The media focus shifted elsewhere. This shift underlines the standardised practices of media institutions. It shows how they tend to construct particular realities, favouring certain societal interests above others.

It is fallacious to see media as passively reflecting the world. The media are active in the social construction of particular realities with particular social and political consequences.

In total, there have been 10 major incidents of violence in Transkei in the last 12 months. A brief glance at statistics on violence elsewhere in the country shows that Transkei is a haven of peace compared to many of the larger South African cities. Violence has engulfed the whole of South Africa and to single out one area, particularly one in which the incidence of violence is relatively low, is completely misleading.

Zola Sondlo is a freelance journalist based in Transkei.

*'Violence has engulfed the whole of South Africa and to single out one area is quite misleading'*



With Daniel Ortega: Mfundo Nkhulu, Faizel Ismail, Bo Petersen, Rob Davics, Laurie Nathan, Saleem Badat, Zenariah Barends.

## Nicaragua: Dashed dreams and resilient hope

FAIZEL ISMAIL gives his impressions of a recent visit to Nicaragua by a team of Cape Town researchers.

AS WE approached Nicaragua from Miami, those of us who had been fellow travellers in the mass movements of the 1980s, recounted the hope, the excitement, and the inspiration that the revolution in Nicaragua in July 1979 had provided for a whole generation of young political activists in the early 1980s in South Africa.

No serious activist of the time did not read or discuss some aspect of the Sandinista struggle. Together with Vietnam, the experiences of the people of Nicaragua could be said to have been the leading influence that inspired the many mass organisations – students, community organisations, women's movements etc – that emerged in our country in the early 1980s.

I recounted too the shock, the distress and the dismay when on February 26, 1990 we heard Daniel Ortega announce over the radio that the Sandinistas had lost the elections. The defeat came after waves of protest and opposition in Eastern Europe brought down one socialist government after another in late 1989.

From the air, Managua, the capital, looked like a large village (despite a population of over one million) with no identifiable central area and hardly a building in sight that was more than two stories high. As we were driven through the city we could see the dilapidated buildings, ruined by both the earthquake of 1973 and the ravages of war.

The hotel in which we stayed was fairly modest, but cost \$60 per room per night (approximately R200). This is very steep by South African standards and about twice the price of the hotel in which we were to stay later in Rio de Janeiro.

The prices of most consumer goods that have a high import content (most consumer goods are increasingly being imported) were extremely high. Few people can afford to pay these prices.