

THE CRIME OF LANGA

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*Now undergoing Preparatory Examination on a charge of
High Treason.*

THE "Crime of Langa" is a factual account of the life of urban Africans in the Western Cape, where the Government's apartheid policy is particularly ruthless. It deprives them of any vestige of security, and the perpetual threat of mass removal to some unknown promised land of milk and honey hangs heavy over their heads.

Nothing is permanent here for the Africans, their whole life is in a state of flux. Where in other parts of the Union freehold property rights have been taken from the Africans, it has been replaced by leasehold rights of about thirty years tenure. But in the Western Cape even that is denied.

In recent years the whole pattern of African life has been changed by these very circumstances, causing a serious breakdown in home life and moral standards.

That the Africans are not indigenous to this particular portion of South Africa has been stated on many occasions by Government officials and historians; but how they came to be here and the many years they have regarded this as their homeland are facts not yet included in the annals of our history.

It is estimated that to-day there are 178,000¹ Africans in the Western Cape. This figure of course includes men, women and children. In the last twenty years their numbers have increased considerably, due not only to natural increases, but mainly because of the inability of the Native Reserves to sustain them. Unwillingly they have left their homes and drifted into this region.

It is interesting to recall that about 100 years ago the farmers of this fertile region were crying out for labour, and to satisfy this demand "many thousands" of African prisoners of war were imported. These men were put to work not only on the farms, but also on the badly needed harbour breakwater—all as indentured labour (i.e. a system of legalised slavery).

The Africans of that period were by no means savages, as many would have us believe. They merely lacked the scientific knowledge which the white settlers have brought with them from Europe.

¹ The figure given by Dr. W. W. Eiselen, Secretary for Native Affairs, in January, 1955.

They were, in the main, cattle farmers and enjoyed well-developed social and political institutions. The Chief was the depository of tribal rights, but he was in normal circumstances no despot, being controlled both in legislation and in the administration of justice by the tribal council and by the tribe itself.

With the passing of the years the female Africans joined their menfolk in the Western Cape, and so they became part and parcel of the composite population of this area.

In recent years the bulk of the Cape Town African population has been concentrated at Langa, a so-called native Township (or location) specially designed to accommodate, in small compact houses, the African and his family. For the bachelor or migrant worker, single quarters known as barracks were provided.

Of course not all the Africans could find homes at Langa, and with the rapid industrial development of this area and the perpetual call for cheap black labour—especially during the war years of 1940-45—many had to find quarters elsewhere. Thus sprang up little tin shanty-towns known as “squatters’ camps”, which are described later in this article.

It must be recorded that no government in South Africa—past or present—has really concerned itself with providing adequate housing for the African people. These “squatters’ camps” have existed, and still do exist, all over the Union. Indeed the local authorities encouraged it, since it meant that no money from general funds was required to build houses, and it assured the industrialists of a continued supply of cheap labour. They were happy to leave things as they were provided that they were kept out of sight!

As far back as 1903 Government officials have tried to persuade local authorities to improve the housing conditions of the urban African, but apart from drawing up reports little or no improvements followed. The Native Affairs Commission of that year (1903) does throw some light on this subject, for in its report it stated:

“The Commission has visited and inspected many Municipal locations and records its opinion that in some respects their condition leaves much to be desired. The Natives who reside in or frequent these locations are, in the main, working people. As such there is every reason why they should be encouraged to stay as useful members of the community.”

The above indicates the policy of the Government half a century ago. Labour was hard to come by and was to be encouraged to settle permanently. Better conditions were advocated but not implemented. Of course, at that time the inhuman migrant labour system was still in its infancy and as yet unorganised.

By 1913 the Western Cape, like other parts of the Union, had a

large and ever growing African population. A Government report on health gives an illuminating account of conditions that prevailed at that period:

“With few exceptions they are a disgrace, and the majority are quite unfit for human habitation . . . Speaking generally, the dwellings are mere shanties, often nothing more than hovels constructed out of bits of old packing case linings, flattened kerosene tins, sacking and other scraps and odds and ends . . . The dwellings are low, dark and dirty, generally encumbered with unclean and useless rubbish. Mud floors are the rule, often below the ground level and consequently flooded in wet weather.”

The fear of disease being spread to the white communities through Africans having to live under such conditions forced many local authorities to provide better accommodation for their African workers, although the above description can be aptly applied to many locations that still exist to-day throughout the Western Cape.

Langa can never fall into this category. It was designed to provide better homes for local Africans. The houses are mainly brick, electric light is available, and the roads are tarred. There are schools, churches, shops, sporting facilities and all that go to make up a civilised community. But a location is limited in size, and as the children grow into adults, marry and have families of their own, either more houses must be built or overcrowding is inevitable.

In the meanwhile the squatters' camps became more numerous. Forced to live in these overcrowded, disease-ridden slums, the poorer people were subjected to gross exploitation, having to pay not only shack rent to the landlords, but also fees for many of the other necessities for bare living.

For many years social workers have endeavoured to alleviate the hardships imposed on these unfortunate people, by instituting such things as crèches, clinics, soup kitchens etc., but no money could be found for houses! The white authorities were rarely called upon to improve conditions. “Send them back to the Reserves”, is a cry so often heard in South Africa when these conditions are exposed to the public. It depicts the callous attitude of the white racist to the plight of the African people in the towns.

A dusty little piece of history is worth recalling, for not so many years ago the cry was just the opposite. In fact it was government legislation which first drove the Africans from the territories which were allocated to them by the white intruders.

In 1894 the Prime Minister of the Cape Colony, Cecil Rhodes, devised a method for obtaining labour for the diamond mines and for the white farmers. He introduced a Bill in that year taxing the male African population, and made no secret of its implications. He stated, “By the gentle stimulant of the labour tax you will

remove from them that life of sloth and laziness; you will teach them the dignity of labour and make them contribute to the prosperity of the state, and make them give some good return for our wise and good government.”

It would be correct to say that the Africans in South Africa have contributed far more than their share to the prosperity of the State! South Africa is to-day one of the wealthiest countries in the world, while the African population has remained poverty-stricken, semi-literate and chained hand and foot by legislative enactments.

With the unexpected rise to power of the Nationalist Party in 1948 on their ambiguous slogan of apartheid, drastic legislation followed to eliminate the “black spots” (i.e. the squatters’ camps and shanty towns) which are so characteristic of racial differences in South Africa.

The new pattern of homes for Africans and their families differed vastly from that found at Langa, where, as I have stated, family units live in comparative decency. The government announced that in future no funds would be made available for family houses at Langa. Instead, only single barracks for migrant labourers will be permitted, so that in due course Langa will become a huge camp designed to accommodate about 20,000 male African migrant labourers. The families now living there will be removed.

The economic and social effect upon the lives of the people who are affected by the migrant labour system is really the subject of a long article by itself, but I cannot resist the temptation to touch upon some of the cardinal evils of this system since it has been officially stated as government policy that as far as all the Africans in the Western Cape are concerned, *all families will ultimately be repatriated to the Native Reserves and only migrant labourers will be allowed in this area.*

This is the future that faces the inhabitants of such places as Langa. Repatriated to the Reserves—which are as foreign to the bulk of these people as it would be to transplant, say, a Londoner to the plains of Nebraska. And from the Reserves the male African must return to the urban areas to earn his livelihood as a migrant labourer, leaving his wife and family to fend for themselves as best they can.

Few white people realise just what it means to be a black migrant labourer. It is not unusual for young households to disintegrate almost as soon as they are formed. The separation which, except for a few brief months, may last any period between six and ten years. The burden that falls upon the women who are thus left

behind is indescribable. They must till and care for the land—usually without any help—and also keep their homes in good repair.

The women are quite unable to earn the money necessary to maintain themselves and their children, who often become a burden far beyond their strength. Occasionally the woman receives money from her husband, but more often than not his wages are so meagre and his job so precarious that few women in the Reserves know anything but dire poverty.

This is the fate that awaits the people of Langa—a crime with few parallels in living history. But the tragedy does not end there.

In the meantime preparations are proceeding to build a “transit emergency camp” at Nyanga West, some eight miles further out of the town, for the purpose of accommodating all African families in this area. A word or two about Nyanga is necessary in order to give the reader some idea of the type of accommodation approved by the Government.

Nyanga West was designed to hold about 8,000 African families living in tin shanties principally in the Northern suburbs of Cape Town. Each tenant has to pay £1 per month for a plot measuring 27 feet by 14 feet. Upon this the squatter may erect a shack, which usually consists of the rusted tins that comprised his former residence. Very few Africans can afford the new material necessary to house their families properly.

To anyone who has not seen the state of these “pondokkies” they defy description. Nothing short of a magic wand is necessary in order to break these down from the squatters’ camps and re-erect them at Nyanga. Yet it must be done before the Council’s bulldozers reduce them to rubble. To see these unfortunate people struggling during the weekends to comply with the removal orders (although the officials deny compulsion) is a heart-breaking experience.

The whole position of the Nyanga West Township is summed up in a Cape Town City Council minute dated 29th November, 1955. It states:—

“In connection with the establishment of the new Native Township at Nyanga West, your Committee has been informed by the Department of Native Affairs that it is an essential prerequisite to the approval of any projects for the provision of services in the scheme to be financed from Native Services Levy Fund that the Council shall first set up an emergency or transit camp for Natives at Nyanga in terms of section 6 of the Prevention of Illegal Squatters Act No. 52 of 1951.

“In the case of Local Authorities outside the Western Cape, the requirement is the setting up of “Site and Service” schemes, which are, in fact, embryo home-ownership schemes, whereby sites with the minimum essential services are allocated to individual Natives on which the Natives and the local authority are expected in time to build approved houses. “Site and Service” schemes are not, however, permitted in the Western Cape.

"In view of the special circumstances pertaining to the Western Cape, the Minister of Native Affairs has agreed to the financing from Levy Funds of the reticulation of minimum necessary services inside the scheme by way of a grant in terms of section 19(3) *bis* (f) of Act 25 of 1945. Link services will be financed from Levy Funds in terms of section 19 (3) *bis* (d) of the Act.

"When all the Natives now living in the various squatters' camps have been concentrated under proper control in the emergency camp, all those families who, in accordance with policy, are not entitled to be in the area will be repatriated and approved houses will be built for those families who qualify under section 10 of the Act to remain in the urban area.

"The type of house to be constructed in the scheme should be capable of conversion to single quarters in order that when the declared long-term policy of replacing married Natives by migratory workers is put into effect, the conversion will be simple and inexpensive. Similarly, the buildings should be reconvertible to family dwellings should Native migratory labour ultimately be replaced by Coloureds."

Thus the plan unfolds.

1. No houses will be built until all squatters are in the emergency camp.
2. Those not entitled to remain will be repatriated.
3. Houses must be easily converted to single quarters for migrant labourers.

Soon the day will come when no black child will live and laugh in Langa. Exactly when no one knows . . . but there are many thousands who care, and one day those responsible for this crime will stand accused.