

**The Riot Police
and the
Suppression of Truth**

**memorandum prepared for
Members of Parliament**

by The Rev. D. P. H. Russell

THE RIOT POLICE AND THE SUPPRESSION OF TRUTH

TO: MEMBERS OF PARLIAMENT

Dear Sir,

A copy of a report on the "Rôle of the Riot Police in the Burnings and Killings in Nyanga, Christmas 1976" was sent to you in January this year by the Ministers' Fraternal of Langa, Guguletu, and Nyanga. The subsequent banning of this report might lead some to the misguided conclusion that its contents give a basically untrue picture of the events in question. I believe it to be my duty to write to you to testify to the truth of what was written.

Basic truth of the Report on the Rôle of the Riot Police.

I am confident that any impartial investigation would fully confirm the truth of its contents and that any possible inaccuracies discovered would be of minor significance, and rather serve to highlight the basic veracity of the total contents.

I have made a point of personally interviewing and re-checking the accounts of very many eye-witnesses. I have done so with care and thoroughness. I have not only spoken to a large number of the Residents, I have also made a point of visiting Migrant Workers in the Nyanga Hostels. My investigations confirm the contents of the Report.

Many prepared to testify.

I am far from being alone in trying to discover and record the truth about these matters. Apart from fellow members of the Ministers' Fraternal, I have since learnt that a group of Nyanga residents have conducted their own investigation. In January they sent a memorandum to the Secretary of the Cillie Commission. Their account further confirms the facts as presented in the Ministers' Fraternal Report. Moreover they and several residents are prepared to give verbal evidence in court. They asked the Commission to return to Cape Town, but a reply received six weeks later made it clear that the Commission did not plan to return.

Police and Security Police investigate - What are they doing with their evidence?

In the meantime the C.I.D. (Col. Kotze) and Security Police (Major van Niekerk) have been making their own investigations. I happen to know that the Police have statements and affidavits from several witnesses. In spite of this, an attempt is being made to force me to divulge the names of three particular people. On 17th February I was sentenced to 3 months imprisonment for refusing to do so. (The matter is on appeal). What exactly do the Police expect to do with the names they are demanding from me? Under the circumstances, it is surely reasonable to ask what the Police are doing with all the evidence they already have from several witnesses.

I feel bound to say that I find it very difficult to believe that either the State or the Police are seriously anxious to bring to justice Riot Police who act provocatively and brutally as a law unto themselves. Am I wrong in assuming that, in refusing to issue the Riot Police with numbers on their uniforms, the State is purposely making it extremely difficult to identify those who "act in bad faith"? It is most unlikely that any specific Riot Police could be identified; thus it would seem that the course open to the Police would be to institute civil proceedings against their own Minister of Police. Can one really believe that this is a serious possibility?

Implications of Indemnity Act.

Furthermore, the new Indemnity Act is going to make it very difficult indeed to bring a successful action against the Police. Far from facilitating the process whereby the Police can bring their brother Police to court for brutal actions, it seems manifest that the State is purposely making it increasingly difficult to do so.

/Harassment ...

Harassment and Suppression of the Truth.

Since we sent that Report to Members of Parliament and others, and since the Police started investigating, it appears to many of us in the Fraternal that it is we clergy who are being investigated, and not the activities of the Riot Police. Some of us have been subpoenaed three times; some have been warned that they may be charged for producing undesirable literature; at least two have been threatened with the possibility of being forced to give evidence for the State; others have had their homes raided. I have been warned by the Security Police of a possible charge for possessing copies of the original Report. It is clear to those involved that the Report was banned as undesirable literature because it brought appalling truths to light.

RIOT POLICE TO BLAME FOR CHRISTMAS WEEKEND UPRISINGS

During December there was resistance in some hostel areas to the anti-shebeen campaign. The tensions between certain "hostel dwellers" and "residents" erupted into clashes. These tensions were subsequently exploited; hostel dwellers were deceived into believing that they would be prevented from going to work and might thereby lose desperately needed jobs. False reports were spread of imminent attacks from the "residential area".

It was against this background of tension and rumour that the Christmas weekend upheavals took place.

It is my conviction, however (and I believe that I share this with hundreds of those involved) that the Riot Police could without great difficulty have prevented the Christmas weekend upheavals.

I believe furthermore (and the accounts overwhelmingly indicate) that a section of the Riot Police actually instigated the violent clashes and took sides with a group of hostel dwellers.

Further Eye-witness accounts.

The following are a further series of eye-witness accounts, which I recorded myself in personal interviews; I questioned the people myself and I believe that they are sincere and true accounts: -

1. RIOT POLICEMAN THREATENS GROUP OF RESIDENTS WITH ATTACK.

MR. M.T. informed me how he had personally heard a Riot Policeman abusing a group of Nyanga residents on Sunday, 26th December. The Riot Policeman said: "Julle is onbeskof; julle is 'Black Power'." ("You are rude; you are 'Black Power'") and then, pointing to Hostel dwellers wearing white "doeks" (head-cloths), the Riot Policeman added: "Daardie mense sal julle (residents) slaani" ("Those people will beat you - residents.")

Note: A peculiar aspect of the Christmas upheavals was the wearing of distinctive white head-cloths (doeks) by a section of the hostel dwellers (migrant workers) whom Residents believe were instigated by the Riot Police.

2. NEARLY KILLED AS RIOT POLICE WATCH.

MRS. P.Z. "On Sunday morning, 26th December, seeing that so many other houses had already been set alight, I went to help remove furniture from house no. ... to save things from being burnt. In the early afternoon we saw Hostel dwellers with white doeks and also the Riot Police. I saw Riot Policemen beckoning to (khaeba) the men ... to bolted our door. The men with white doeks then attacked the house and set it on fire. The Riot Police were standing, watching, when the house was attacked. We soon ran out to avoid the flames and were set upon.

/: was ...

MRS. P.Z. (contd.)

"I was beaten almost to death. There were shouts of 'Kwasele!' ('Enough') and the men left. I staggered to the corner of 5th Avenue and Zwelitsha Drive, where I saw a police van. I appealed for help, but instead a policeman said 'Jy moet ons nie rooi maak nie met jou bloed!' ('You must not make us red with your blood!'). I was really red all over with blood. I then managed to find some strength and climbed into the van myself, and collapsed. They did take me to hospital.

"Another man, who was in the house with us at the time, is still in hospital. And a youth died of the wounds.

"I had thought the White man, who is above us (ophezu kwethu) in authority would help us. I expected him to stop the attack, but he watched on and let it happen."

3. LEFT TO BE NEARLY KILLED.

M.F. "On the 26th December, some time after midday, we were told by the Riot Police to stay in our homes. Soon afterwards our house was attacked by men wearing white doeks (head-cloths). The house was set alight with a petrol bomb, and I tried to escape by the back door. - I was caught and attacked. I managed somehow to get away and came into 6th Avenue, where another group saw me, and I was attacked again. While on the ground, I saw a big Police lorry approaching and thought that I would now be saved. Instead, when the lorry drew alongside, the Policeman shouted 'Misk hom dood' ('Kill him') and drove on. Soon after that my attackers must have thought I was dead - I had been backed all about the head - and they left. After a time I managed to make my way to the Office, where officials called for the ambulance."

4. ARM BROKEN

MS F. "I was in my house, No. M ... Zwelitsha in Nyanga, on the afternoon of 26th December, when it was attacked. Two hostel dwellers with white doeks beat me up and my arm was broken. At the time of the attack I saw two Riot Policemen armed with guns. They did nothing to stop those attacking me."

5. RIOT POLICE SHOOT, OPENING WAY FOR ATTACK.

MR. & MRS. V.N. "Our house was attacked on Sunday, the 26th. We saw the hostel dwellers with white doeks together with the Riot Police. The Riot Police shot at the residents, opening the way for the attack. The Riot Police made no attempt to stop those who were throwing petrol bombs. My wife was beaten up and had to have 6 stitches above her eye. Our house was burnt - we lost everything - our furniture - everything. A child in a nearby house was killed. A Mr. Botha (a Black resident) was shot dead, when getting out of his car, after coming back from church. We are all shocked. There had been no fighting that we knew-of before the Riot Police shot the way through."

/Further ...

Further Incidents after Christmas Weekend Upheavals.

6. AFRAID OF BEING SHOT BY RIOT POLICE.

MR. J.W.

"On the evening of the 5th January, I was standing outside the shop, when two Riot Police came over to me. They both had beer cans and were slightly drunk. I had a book in my hand, and the one asked: 'Is jy geleerd?' ('Are you educated?'). He snatched the book from me, and I protested. He pushed me back and said: 'Ek kom van die Transvaal af - jy is 'n kaffir; ek is wit; ek is jou baas.' ('I come from the Transvaal - you are a kaffir; I am white; I am your master.')

"He tried to hit me and said: 'Kom, kom, baklei.' ('Come on, fight.'). I refused. He then threatened to shoot me, but I managed to run away. I did not sleep at my place that night, as I feared they might come back and shoot me."

7. BOY BEATEN UP BY RIOT POLICE AND BITTEN BY POLICE DOG.

"One morning in February I was picked up by three Riot Policemen in a Langa Street, and taken to the bushy area not far from the Catholic Church.

"I was then beaten with a baton several times by each of the three Riot Police. After this I was pushed away and allowed to go. A Police dog was then set on me and bit me in the hand and leg. I was terrified and screaming. They eventually took the dog off me.

"I was not taken to get treatment for my wounds, but instead was kept in the cells of Langa Police station for the night. My leg was bleeding through the night. Some fellow prisoners helped me to bandage it with rags.

"I was brought before the Langa Court the next morning and charged with a 'pass offence', but was acquitted when I produced my pass to show that I was actually born in Cape Town. (I am 18 years old.)

"After being allowed to go, I went to the Clinic, where a doctor treated my wounds."

Fear of Police.

I think it is important to point out once again the fear the people have for the police.

Mrs. R.L. has informed me that she knows two people who witnessed how Riot Police pulled her husband from his house in Zwelitha, Nyanga and then allowed other men, wearing white dooks, to kill him.

More than once she has tried to arrange for me to meet these witnesses, but so far in vain. She says they are afraid.

The eye-witness accounts contained in this memorandum should provide ample prima facie evidence as to why people fear and mistrust the Riot Police, and as to why they believe they know from experience the way Riot Police have acted and continue to act as a law unto themselves.

People believe that the introduction of the Indemnity Act will only encourage this ominous tendency.

Moreover, the number of deaths in detention provides, for Blacks and others, further terrible confirmation of their distrust of the South African Police structures.

Mrs. A.H. of Nyanga informed me that she had heard of more than one person who had fallen to their death from the window, while in police custody. She said people were very afraid of being detained, because they believe the police might mishandle them and even kill them.

/ RIOT POLICE

RIOT POLICE GUILTY OF HARMING RACE RELATIONS AND WELFARE OF SOUTH AFRICA.

Members of the Ministers' Fraternal are being accused of producing documents harmful to race relations and the welfare of the State. This is a mockery of justice and truth. It is the activities of a section of the Riot Police that have had such a disastrous effect on race relations, and it is their activities which are so harmful to the long-term welfare of our country. It is their activities which are shattering confidence in structures of authority, and which will provoke desperate and despairing violence in response.

By exposing these shocking things, it was hoped and is hoped that those in authority would act to halt them. Instead it appears that we are being accused of the very evils we are so anxious to eradicate.

I will not be intimidated into silence by false accusations and absurd charges.

STATE CONFRONTING THE CHURCH.

Trying to force the breaking of confidences.

In company with other groups and individuals, the Roman Catholic Bishops' Conference has spoken out boldly about what appear to be "reliable reports of police brutality". They too have felt bound to maintain the confidentiality of their sources, in spite of being pressured by General Prinsloo, who warned them of a "remedy in law".

The way of wisdom and justice lies in either amending the law to protect confidentiality between priest and parishioner (as presently exists between lawyer and client) or to maintain the present tacit understanding that in matters of conscience of this kind, the State should refrain from bringing the issue to a head.

In using certain legal machinery in an attempt to force me to give names of eye-witnesses, which my conscience and calling as a priest forbids me to reveal for the very reason that they spoke to me in strictest confidence, the authorities have chosen a confrontation rôle. It has therefore become necessary to put our position firmly and clearly. We Christians and priests of God's Church feel we are in duty bound to maintain confidences. The Church will continue to be a channel of Christ's compassion for all who are oppressed. We would be guilty before God and our neighbour if we simply "passed by on the other side" to escape the risks involved in doing all we can to bring healing.

WHY I ISSUE THIS MEMORANDUM.

I believe I am serving the public interest by bringing these truths into the open.

I am not expecting particular Riot Policemen to be brought to book. I appreciate that others might consider it worthwhile, but I am not personally pleading for any judicial inquiry. The fact that the Riot Police are purposely given no numbers on their uniforms, and that the Indemnity Act is soon likely to become law, does not lead me to believe that official inquiries will achieve much. This memorandum is being published as a matter of urgent public concern, in the hope that it may act as a deterrent.

While I do not want to suggest that all Riot Policemen act brutally, the activities of some have created a gulf of mistrust and fear and despair. After the Christmas weekend upheavals, certain Riot Police were still reported to be acting provocatively and brutally. This is a further reason why I felt it to be my duty to issue this memorandum - I fear that the Riot Police could provoke further violence and that it would be irresponsible of me not to inform you of the situation.

I write as a South African, like most of you, born in this country. I write out of a concern for the welfare of all our people, believing that God sees all that is happening, and calls us to repent with deeds, so that His Peace may come to our land.

Yours sincerely in the Service of Christ,

D. Russell
Rev. D. Russell

27, St. James Street,
1001STOCK - Cape Town.

11th April, 1977.

27, St. James Street, WOODSTOCK: Cape, 7925.

11th April, 1977.
Easter Monday.

TO: ALL CONCERNED

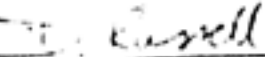
Dear Friend,

THE RIOT POLICE AND SUPPRESSION OF TRUTH

I am distributing this memorandum, prepared for Members of Parliament, as widely as possible to various leaders in the community, because I believe this to be a matter which affects us all in a fundamental way.

I am sending this to you because I believe that you would want to be informed, and I ask you to use your influence to ensure that the truth is made known in a way which helps to heal our situation.

Yours sincerely in Christ,


Rev. D. Russell