

This edited eye-witness account of the action by South African police in a Black township near Cape Town was written by a Coloured teacher in a letter to a friend in Britain. The names have been changed by the Guardian

MY DEAREST L,

Received your letter today. I feel so terribly, terribly guilty. I have started several letters and not completed one of them. I am just too subjective about what has happened in our country. I have enclosed news cuttings which may give you an idea as to what things were like yesterday and today. The headmaster stayed away from school, as did some other teachers who feared for their cars and their lives. We haven't done much by way of teaching since the Soweto riots first began. Kids were restless, tense and confused.

The kids were so upset, they wanted a show of solidarity, which resulted in the Bontebenwel riot where kids were shot. Then all hell broke loose in the Peninsula. The kids at the high school refused to attend classes.

Two or three days and the kids were back in their classrooms but then some teachers began to work the kids over, calling their names and just dismissing their protests as stupid. We tried so hard to make these people to see reason. They were really antagonising the kids.

We had fights and slanging matches and then on Wednesday the kids left the school ground and boarded buses and trains and God alone knows what else to get to Athlone where things were so bad that I feared for my life.

Hundreds upon hundreds of students lined Klipfontein Road. The cops had used force to disperse them which infuriated onlookers. Then the rock-throwing began. We were caught between the cop vans—a yellow HP Vwagen. A sure target. Jesus—I was scared.

The sheer savagery of the attacks on people—children—was

just too much to bear. Anyway, we got out of that alive. When back at school we discovered that some of our kids had been arrested.

The headmaster buggers off home and leaves me to carry the can. Yusuf and I rushed off to Athlone police station, which Stevie and Mike went back to rescue some more kids. Teachers from other schools were being beaten up.

The headmaster had locked the phone away. Very nearly broke the door down to get the damn thing. Phone Athlone. Some cop says that the kids are already in the cells. What for? To be charged. With what? Public violence!

Demanded to speak to the guy at the top who was actually prepared to listen to me. I argued that it was not possible for anyone to identify the owner of the hand that threw the stone. Not in such a crowd. Also added that I had seen myself how cops beat up and arrested innocent kids. He listened and let them go.

That was Wednesday. Yesterday things at school looked really bad. One moment we had all five hundred plus students and the next minute not a single kid. The headmaster stayed away—allegedly ill. So we rush down the road to Stevie's Kombi. Heard that the kids were at the school annexe. Not there. Botha and his staff left the school premises within minutes. Mrs Klaasen (one of the teachers) had pulled a gun on the kids (we heard) and they were infuriated. They pelted Botha with eggs, tomatoes, and all the kids marched to the teacher training college.

We rushed over there. The cops were already at the college. I went

over to speak to the cops and received from them the assurance that they would not molest the kids if they marched back to high school in an orderly fashion.

The kids sang "We shall overcome"—Oh yes! along the route to the square we discovered to our horror that hundreds of other kids had joined them. Peace still prevailed though the riot cops had arrived in all their flowered splendour.

Then the riot squad moved in. They baton-charged the kids and for five minutes or so there was complete pandemonium.

They carried on marching and kept saying "No violence, no violence" and moving each other along. They had linked arms by then. The cops baton charged them again. They dispersed. Whistles could be heard all over and regrouped again. By now the kids were really angry. They started up a chant. "We shall sacrifice." Thousands of them.

Then some stupid Afrikaans cow rushes over to the cops and shouts "Kill the f... black bastards." Onlookers began to argue with her and some of the kids stopped to intervene saying "No violence, no violence," Hester and I kept trying to move them on. The scene was getting ugly. Then the teargas was fired.

All hell broke loose. The cops dondered (hit) the kids. Some jewellery rushed out and shot off a gun. Two guys—construction workers I think they were, donned track tops and flung a piece of concrete at a cop van.

Cops were beating just anyone who did not have a white skin. Back into Adderley Street. More beatings. More teargas. We stood

in the doorway of some building. A teargas canister was shot right into the entrance. Some thoughtful person had left a bucket of water. I tore off my jersey to get to my sweaters to wet them. One for Hester, one for myself. More teargas. Another scramble and I felt myself going. I was tearing myself up a flight of stairs. Choking, vomiting. We had caught the full blast of it all.

I scrambled around looking for kids. Found Johnnie and another boy. Husted them back into St George's Street. A bank manager opened his door to us. Onlookers were boing the cops. Cops continued beating the kids. Kids continued chanting. "We are not afraid to die!"

We got around the corner into Darling Street. There's a hobo, peacefully sleeping through a riot. I go completely hysterical with laughter. It was just so bizarre. We negotiate our way into Plein Street. We are on the Parade side—another baton rush. Mike and Ganiefia drag me along to the opposite side. Mike's great idea. It's the white bus stop, there are whites there. They won't rush them. But they do, to get to the kids. I don't know how I did it but a taxi—the only car on that whole goddamn street—comes cruising down. I rush across the street in front of the cab. The taxi driver throws a door open. The kids scramble in.

We get back to the school: about 100-plus kids sitting in the quad. "You OK Miss?" they say. I nod my head. "Next time we wreck their f... schools?" they say.—Love, peace, and solidarity,

Joanna.