RURAL DISLOCATION

The poorest rural people of South Africa have very little defence against the continual dislocation of their lives by evictions, relocations, expropriations and the arbirtrary shuffling of Bantustan boundaries. The desperate struggles of individuals and communities to maintain some security and stability usually take place far away from public view.

Below are some case studies from the files of Grahamstown Rural Committee and the Transvaal Rural Action Committee. More reports will follow in later issues.

POTSDAM

From a report by the Grahamstown Rural Committee.

The community at Potsdam have been suffering for seven years. In July 1983 they were forcibly removed from their home at Blue Rock, South Africa and dumped in the Ciskei. This was "because they are Xhosa people". Thus they became citizens of Ciskei on December 4, 1981 and ceased to become SA citizens. They are "aliens" or "foreigners" in SA.

In Potsdam people have died in large numbers from tuberculosis contracted there, they have lost their jobs and barely manage to survive. There is continual harassment from the Ciskei police and people have also died at the hands of the vigilantes.

In all this time the community, with the help of the Grahamstown Rural Committee (GRC) has made great effort to be reinstated as SA citizens. Numerous applications have been made to the Grahamstown courts in a case between the Potsdam residents and the SA government plus the Minister of Home Affairs. Because of the harassment that they are suffering the community applied to the courts as a matter of extreme emergency but on more than two occasions the court has postponed hearing for lengthy periods, thereby abandoning residents to continued harassment. These delays are seen as a deliberate means of preventing the community from regaining permanent residence and citizenship of South Africa. The delays continue at present.

The community has fled the Ciskei twice, erecting squatter shacks at the roadside near Fort Jackson on the SA side of the border. Both times they were forcibly removed back to Ciskei by SA authorities.

By 1987 the community was losing its cohesion. The residents' association was not functioning properly and the court cases took the initiative away from the people. Their fate was to be decided by court and they could do little but sit passively and await the outcome.

Their houses are built of wood, iron, mud and parts of shipping containers. Many are shacks with rocks on the roofs to prevent them being blown away in strong wind. There are a few taps and prefab toilets placed at random. Mother Theresa expressed a wish to visit the "Bush People of Potsdam". She did briefly meet a few of the leaders.

BLUE ROCK

The boundary between the Ciskei and the Republic of South Africa runs through or in the vicinity of the area known as Blue Rock. There is, however, no fence or natural barrier indicating the position of the boundary. A group of residents applying to reinstate their SA citizenship stated that most, if not all, of the persons living at Blue Rock



in December 1981 resided on the South African side of the boundary and that they themselves resided on "Farm 1281". Land surveyor George Eddy confirms that Farm 1281 lies within the Republic of South Africa. The community says that for all purposes such as the payment of pensions, health services, court actions, etc., they were accepted and regarded as being SA citizens. Until the 12th June 1983 they lived at their homes in Blue Rock. On 12th June 1983 they were removed from Blue Rock at gunpoint by Ciskeian police who demolished their houses and took them to Potsdam in the Ciskei. They were left bewildered, in the open veld and they had to set about trying to provide shelters for themselves and their families there. They were also assaulted and harassed by the police and had to produce development tax receipts.

MRS YAWA

Mrs Yawa, aged 40, lives in a shack in Potsdam. Her husband died in December 1988, of tuberculosis contracted in Potsdam in 1983. Due to his failing health he was forced to leave work in 1984. Mr Yawa was a member of the Masakhane Burial Society. He was in arrears to the amount of R80 when he died. The family had to negotiate with the society to get a coffin and a collection was taken to pay for the funeral. Mrs Yawa has four children; two were attending school but had to leave because the family could not afford the costs. While at Blue Rock Mrs Yawa managed to get domestic work. Now she is forced to beg for food from her neighbours. "We must sleep without meals when we cannot get something from sympathetic people. We prefered Blue Rock. We are assaulted here time and again by Ciskei police demanding taxes. (She showed scars on her legs from being assaulted with shamboks.) We were never asked for taxes before. We were told in the early hours of the morning that we were to be taken to Mdantsane only to find that we were dropped here. We were placed in an open space and given tents."

There are many such painful stories throughout the community.

THE POTSDAM THREE

An application by three residents of Potsdam to be declared permanent residents of South Africa has been argued in the Grahamstown courts. The residents, Mrs Nellie Nozewu, Mrs Velile Dasi and Mr Popo Ntwanambi applied for a court order:

- Confirming their right to permanent residence in SA, without any permit or exemption.
- Interdicting the government from preventing them from being permanently resident in SA.
- Interdicting the government from subjecting them or their families to forced removal from SA.

The residents stated that they were born in SA, acquired citizenship by birth and have not relinquished it. At all times they have been permanently resident in SA and of Blue Rock.

On 22 January this year the Supreme Court delivered its judgement which gave the above residents of Potsdam the right of permanent residence in SA without permit or exemption. The court found that the community had been unlawfully removed from Blue Rock in SA into the Ciskei.

The SA government has since given notice of its intention to appeal against this judgement. This could take up to two years to be heard, thus frustrating the community for a further two years. The entire Potsdam community are in a position identical to that of the three applicants.

Although the court has given the people of Potsdam the right to permanent residence in SA, it has not given them a specific place to go to in SA to settle. The backlog of African housing is enormous. Even if the community could afford to pay township rents, which they cannot, they would find it almost impossible to acquire housing. They were "squatting" at Blue Rock and with new legislation will find it illegal to go back to this.

In 1986 SA enacted the Restoration of SA Citizenship Act. This act provided that persons who had never lived in an independent homeland such as the Ciskei, who lost their SA citizenship on the independence of that homeland and who have ever since remained resident in SA could regain their SA citzenship. Crucial to an application to regain SA citizenship is that one must be resident in SA at the time of making the application. Thus the struggle for a place to stay is important to their regaining their SA citizenship. The quest is now to settle on SA land. So far the people of Potsdam have not received any help.

While SA is not under a legal obligation to provide them with a place to stay, the government is certainly under a moral obligation to do so, firstly because it allowed them to be forcibly removed to the Ciskei by the Ciskeian authorities in the first place; secondly because on two occasions SA itself forced the community back into the Ciskei and was responsible for the suffering and deaths that occured in consequence; and thirdly because until the community is permanently resident in SA they cannot regain their SA citizenship and thus be guaranteed access to SA medical services and old age pensions etc. Thus if SA is slow to meet their needs there will in all likelihood be another emergency situation created by a mass exodus, something that can only add to the suffering of the community and serve to embarrass SA further.

STOP PRESS

POTSDAM EXODUS

On Tuesday 11 April the third exodus of the Potsdam community began. More than 500 people settled on an on an unused farm near Mount Ruth in South Africa. The farm is owned by the Department of Development Aid (DDA). Police arrived on the scene during the first night but residents showed them the January court judgement and the SAP seemed satisfied that nothing was amiss.

DDA has said they will provide land for the community. They are responsible for the administration of rural black areas, though they have never intervened on behalf of the community before. Minister Viljoen has approved that the Potsdam people be settled on a portion of Farm 303.

People are living under plastic shelters using thorn bushes as frames. Doctors have visited the farm and emergency supplies have been sent by relief agencies.

The community plan to call their new home Eluxolweni, "Land of Peace."



Potsdam