

## When blackouts fan the flames afresh

**T**HAT blaze at Sasol, the biggest fire in the history of South Africa, might have gone largely unreported if the Police Amendment Bill had been law last weekend.

Police arrived on the double, securing the area and searching for the saboteurs. That made the occasion a police operation against terrorism. Penalty for reporting such police action is R15 000, or jail for up to eight years, or both.

A terrified public would have seen flames roaring hundreds of metres into the sky but newspapers would not have been free to report what was happening.

Even one soldier on duty is a troop movement in terms of the Defence Act, so the presence of soldiers, even as firefighters, cannot be reported without the consent of the military authorities.

If the military authorities chose to go further and declare Sasol a strategic installation then they, too, would have the power selectively to black out parts, or all, of the news about such a spectacle.

Rumour-fed panic, we contend, would be the likely reaction. Whether the authorities order a total ban on publication, or wheth-

er they give permission for full or partial publication, the fact remains that the news of a particular event is being managed, and Press, radio and TV manipulated. The public is no longer being told what is happening, but only what Government thinks is good for them to know about what is happening.

And once the public is not sure how much it is being told, uncertainty sets in. In this time of upheaval and unrest particularly, people need to know what is happening around them, and what the authorities are doing about it. It is most important, as the Steyn Commission report on Press coverage and police matters stressed, to keep the public as fully informed as possible in an escalating conflict situation.

It is widespread public alarm, travelling on hysterical and malicious rumour, that is the partner of terrorism. It is not, as some Nationalist commentators are now suggesting, the public notice given to terrorism by the Press, by special Parliamentary debates and Cabinet comment. Blazes like the R6-million one at Sasol do not fizzle out because someone pretends they are not there.