

THE COUNTER TO TERRORISM

A PATTERN is being set. Four times in less than a year the targets have been smaller police stations at times when most of the men were away or asleep. The terrorists swoop in — with more firepower than skill in the cases thus far — and pepper the building indiscriminately before making a rapid departure. South Africa can be thankful that, despite the Russian rocket-launchers and AK-47s, nobody was killed.

In the four attacks so far, the police death toll has been mercifully low considering the viciousness of the attackers. Tragically, we cannot count on that always being so.

The Minister of Police, Mr Louis le Grange, has referred to the fact that the Booyens raiders left behind leaflets demanding the release of Walter Sisulu and Nelson Mandela. The police have suggested that calls to free these men somehow led to the events of Thursday night. Yet it is important for South Africans to appreciate that it is not as simple as that.

The Minister himself warned the country long before the Mandela controversy arose that it could expect terror attacks to increase.

The strategy seems clear. It is to pick a relatively weak but symbolic target (policemen are associated with all the laws that Blacks hate) and literally to try to terrorise the occupants. In so doing, the attackers might very well seize upon some or other subject of topical controversy.

But their actions are clearly part of a longer-term plan, as warnings from the Prime Minister and others have rightly emphasised. The objective is to bring South Africa to its knees, we have been told.

Since governments cannot bow to pressure of this kind — and no sensible person would want them to — it is a tactic that can only succeed if and when the violence is so far advanced that the country can be said to be in a state of civil war and the government itself ready to talk surrender terms. This is what happened in Rhodesia.

It is what the Prime Minister was referring to when he spoke of the risk of "revolution" in South Africa.

The counter is to demonstrate convincingly to ordinary, peace-loving people that there is another way to achieve political ambitions. This, in a country where race relations have been allowed to deteriorate to an alarming degree, requires dramatic moves of reconciliation.

And these moves must be made from a position of strength. South Africa has the strength now.

If part of the intention behind the Booyens raid was to promote a campaign to free Mandela and others, then it will certainly have backfired. The Government will be more determined than ever now to stand firm. But, for the sake of a peaceful future, we dare not fall into the trap of thinking it is pandering to terrorism to make any conciliatory moves at all.

When blackouts fan the flames afresh

THAT 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.

Failure to understand

PEOPLE who care about this country must be wringing their hands in despair after the performance by Nationalist MPs in the Assembly on Tuesday.

Here we are in a critical week, with ANC saboteurs blasting Sasol and blacks venting their feelings against apartheid by striking and boycotting schools and buses. And what were the Nationalists doing? They were heckling and jeering the official Opposition's Mr Ray Swart as he tried to make the elementary point that our real security lies in developing a constitution that the majority of our people will defend.

"In the immediate and long-term future," Mr Swart said, "the only real security is the security which stems from the contentment, loyalty and com- patrio-

tism of all sections of the population."

The Nationalist response seems to confirm what we suggested earlier this week: that the Government simply refuses to understand what is happening around us. While people resort to extreme means to show their rejection of its system, the Government presses ahead with a new constitution which has no chance of majority support.

Despite the lessons of Soweto and Zimbabwe and of our most recent tribulations, it continues to impose its will on the majority, believing that anyone who opposes its plans is undermining law and order. If someone dares to say what the majority of South Africans really want, he is jeered and heckled — or banned or detained.

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