

ARTICLE FOR THE ARGUS

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Yesterday we heard with a sinking feeling of horror, that seventeen of our Black fellow citizens had been shot in a confrontation with the Police, confirming the trend of violence and counter-violence which has become characteristic of life in South Africa. On this occasion, our sympathies go out to those betrauded in this incident.

This incident takes place, too, against the background of mounting world hostility, threats of sanctions and the real possibility of disinvestment. Quite apart from its human costs, the shootings could hardly have come at a worse time, more particularly as it happened on the anniversary of the Sharpeville riots, giving the deaths a particular emotional and political significance.

The very urgent - almost desperate - question we now need to answer, is how to restore peace before we drag ourselves any further towards an internal and international disaster.

Two things need to be done. The first and immediate task is to restore calm to Langa township and others affected by the violence. The second is urgently to redress the root causes of Black dissatisfaction. We need to be aware that without the second task being undertaken, the violence will continue to be endemic and incidents like these will continue to occur.

In order to restore calm to the townships, the forces of law and order must take exceptional care not to act provocatively. It stands to reason that the mere presence of police at funerals and processions of mourners constitutes provocation. To actually confront such processions seems, at very least, to be appallingly poor judgement.

Ironically then, on occasions like these, the police should withdraw themselves from their traditional role as guardians of law and order and in fact stay out of the townships. This will give the people an opportunity to vent their grief, without venting their frustration against the police. The time will come when the residents themselves want the police back. In the meantime, the police can just monitor the situation.

Further, should they become involved, the police must immediately start applying conventional riot control methods. For the last year, the television has fed us a diet of scenes of the miner's strikes in Britain, the violence of which was contained without a single fatality. Riot police must be properly equipped and properly trained. Police need to use firearms only as a last resort, when teargas, rubber batons, rubber bullets and itching powder have failed. Police commanders need to be taught how to recognise riot leaders, and taught the skills to negotiate with them.

But these steps will only contain the expressions of political violence. They will not solve the root causes of it. Political violence has been a feature of the Eastern Cape townships for over a year and we are no closer to resolving its root causes. Expressed simply, we need to redress the political and economic frustrations of the inhabitants of this area.

To a certain extent, the riots become understandable when one considers the economic recession which has hit the Port Elizabeth/Uitenhage area so badly. The closure of some motor plants and the restrictions on the operations of others has resulted in large-scale unemployment. Indirectly, the Government must take a great deal of responsibility for this. Its political policies have undermined the economy and have destroyed business confidence, and we are paying the price for its irresponsibility. To avoid repetitions of these tragic events, we need now to lay the foundations of healthy, long-term economic development. Such economic development cannot be shackled to the demands of an obsolete ideology.

Secondly, the Government needs to be forced to spell out clearly and unequivocally, by means of a declaration of intent, its political and constitutional plan for Blacks. The Government can no longer vacillate behind a cabinet committee, nor talk in vague generalities. It must be forced to assure Blacks

- that everybody is a citizen of South Africa and thereby entitled to the resources of the country;

- that it will include the real leaders of Blacks in the central decisionmaking structures.
- that it will honour its oft-repeated undertakings to remove all vestiges of discrimination, including influx control.

Within the framework of such a commitment, we need to start a process of negotiation with the real leaders aimed at reducing the dangerous flashpoint we are fast approaching. A useful start would be the release of the UDF leaders presently charged with treason. It is absurd to offer the release of Mandela in the hope of talking to the ANC while charging people with treason when they continually ask for peaceful change through negotiation. If the Government is not prepared to do that, then let it be known immediately exactly when these people are charged with so that we stop looking like fools in the eyes of the world.

Next we need to induce the Government to take goal-directed steps to address the issue of Black education, which lay at the root of last year's riots. The quality and availability of education needs to be improved as do the facilities themselves. Again, close co-operation with community leaders will assist in setting better standards for education, and for breaking down mistrust.

The government needs to take a fresh look at the local Government structures, to spell out much more clearly the duties and responsibilities of such structures and the relationship these structures have with the Development Boards. The judicial authorities need to take care that local authorities do not become instruments of nepotism and corruption.

We must move and move fast, to redress the grievances and frustrations which the community in Langa face. But we must move equally quickly to find a lasting political solution for all the people in South Africa. The Government seems determined to confront violence with violence. The challenge they in fact face is to break the cycle of violence. Their actions have so far been characterized by ineptitude of enormous proportions. They react, in a kneejerk way, to events without displaying any vision for the future, nor even any sensitivity for the issues at stake.