

# Vigilante violence

**D**uring July the government made two announcements about black local authorities (BLA's). Both indicate an admission that community councils are not popular. The first announcement, that councillors will be required to sign codes of conduct, is an admission about corruption. Its effect is a question of fiddling while Rome is burning.

The second announcement is about the implementation of a section of the BLA Act of 1983 which gives community councillors the power to employ their own 'law enforcement agencies'. This move is far more sinister and is tantamount, literally and figuratively, to adding fuel to the flames.

Events around the country over the last two years, and particularly in Welkom's Thabong township, bear witness to this opinion.

Community councillors are not merely unpopular because they are often corrupt. Community councillors as a form of 'self-government' for black urban communities have been virtually rejected. Research findings included in this report show this. They are a cause of unrest. And in Thabong the situation has got even worse; councillors who employ vigilantes for 'protection' have become a catalyst for carnage and brutality. To give them the power to appoint 'law enforcement agencies' is indeed to add fuel to the flames.

AUDREY COLEMAN recounted the Sash's experience with the victims of a corrupt and brutal community council set-up in Thabong at the Transvaal Branch's open day on June 7. Her report is combined with supporting material collected from news clippings by the Community Education and Information Research Group (CEI)

## A call from Thabong

“On Wednesday May 29 the Black Sash received a call from a doctor in Thabong. Distraught, he said he had to call on someone from the Black Sash. Why the Black Sash? ‘We were most impressed with the Rhikhoto judgement. And the Black Sash is an organisation that keeps out of trouble’, came the reply!

However . . .

He said that each of Thabong's eight councillors was protected by 12 — 15 vigilantes. The vigilantes are drawn from migrants, thugs in the township and some Zulu people from Natal. At night these councillors and their vigilantes roam the township in vans and combis which, according to the doctor, belong to the Administration Board. (The Sash checked two of the number plates and found this to be true.) These deadly squads find victims whom they flog with sjamboks and kirries and assault with pangas.

The doctor said that he had come to the end of his tether treating people in his surgery. One of his patients had 250 wounds. Many people were so badly injured

that they had to be hospitalised and six of these were critically ill. One person, previously blind in one eye had his other eye damaged and is now totally blind.”

Recourse to normal methods of protection, such as police, had apparently failed. For example, as Sash subsequently discovered, a Thabong family of five were assaulted in their home. Even the youngest member aged four did not escape. Hit on the leg with a sjambok, his shin was broken. The family laid a charge at the police station. They received a notice informing them that the senior public prosecutor declined to prosecute!

But at least this family's case got that far! Many others did not. When they went to lay a charge at the police station they were told that if it was a complaint against “those” people it wouldn't be accepted. One man who was assaulted went to lay a charge and he himself was charged instead — with “throwing a stone at a policeman's combi”. He had to pay R100 bail. When the case was heard he won it but no further action was ever taken on his complaint.

So the Black Sash responded by going to Thabong to investigate further. On different occasions Audrey gathered relays of members and, together with a lawyer, went to Welkom. The position was even worse than the doctor described. Audrey related how one boy died as a result of his flogging.

## Some of the victims

‘D M was a boy of 17. He and a friend were coming home from the shops when they saw the vigilantes' car. They ran away because they were afraid. D ran into a nearby house and his friend managed to get home. But the vigilantes found D and brought him to his friend's house. The two boys were picked up and taken to a room, ‘no 29’, at the Admin Board offices. D was made to strip and lie face down on a bench. His feet and head were held down while six or seven vigilantes standing on either side of the bench beat him with sjamboks for about 30 minutes. D was then taken to the police station and his friend was taken home.

The next day D's father found D behind the counter at the police station shivering and looking very ill. His clothes were bloody. The following afternoon the police took D to the Provincial Hospital. The family went to see him there and found him under police guard. The father was asked to sign permission for an operation. D died before the operation.”

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Another boy had a similar experience. He now has epileptic fits which he did not have before . . .

“This young man was asleep at home at 1 am. Two councillors arrived and took him away in a van full of people. They were taken to the Admin building. Told



to undress, he was forced to lie on a bench face down. His head was held down so that he could not see the people on either side of the bench who were beating him.

He and the other people were then taken to the police station. He was told to lie down on a bench in the police station where he then fell asleep.

The next afternoon he was sent to hospital to have his wounds dressed. Taken back to the police station again he was held for two days. He was not given a reason for his imprisonment. On the third day he appeared in court but didn't know the charge. His case was remanded to the end of June.

Sash members saw this young man. He was very ill. His wounds were raw and terribly painful. He has lost control of his bladder. He now has fits that he had never had before."

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The situation in Thabong may be extreme but it arises from a set of grievances that emerge here in this way but exist countrywide. The two most significant grievances in this case are the appalling situation in black education and the rejection of community councils as an alternative to full participation of blacks in the system of government.

#### **Opposition to BLAs**

CEI has analysed and documented developments with black local government structures over the years. Here are some of their conclusions:

The history of the Native Representative Councils, the Advisory Boards, the Urban Bantu Councils, the Community Councils and now the Black Local Authorities reveals that apartheid has failed dismally to redirect residents from central political questions to 'own affairs' in toothless dummy structures.

The extent of the opposition to the Black Local Authorities and the remaining Community Councils can be seen from the following statistics:

- \* 150 town and village councillors have resigned nationwide.
- \* In Tumahole, Ratanda, Mankweng, Cradock, Uitenhage, Humansdorp, Alexandria and Despatch, councils have resigned *en masse*.
- \* Out of 34 Black Local Authorities established under the 1983 Black Local Authorities Act, only five are still functioning.

A *Sunday Times* report (June 2 1985) documents the following attacks against councillors from September 1984 to March 1985:

- 109 attacks were made on councillors
- 5 councillors were killed
- 66 councillors houses or businesses were partly or wholly destroyed.

The local authorities are under a state of siege. In addition to these attacks, bottlestores belonging to Boards, policemen and informers have come under attack.

The *Rand Daily Mail* reported that recent events mark a significant departure from what they term the history of boycott politics that have characterised opposition to dummy councils in the past. 'Political forces in the townships . . . have effectively countered the government's co-optive strategy. They have gone beyond the more traditional methods of **non-collaboration** and boycott; they have resorted to direct and drastic actions against the collaborators'. (*RDM* April 24, 85).

The causes of opposition to the BLA's were also documented by ECI (*see page 35*)

The situation in Thabong must be seen against the background described by the extract from the *RDM*. Added to this is the education crisis, with all its causes, which were as bad, if not worse in Thabong.

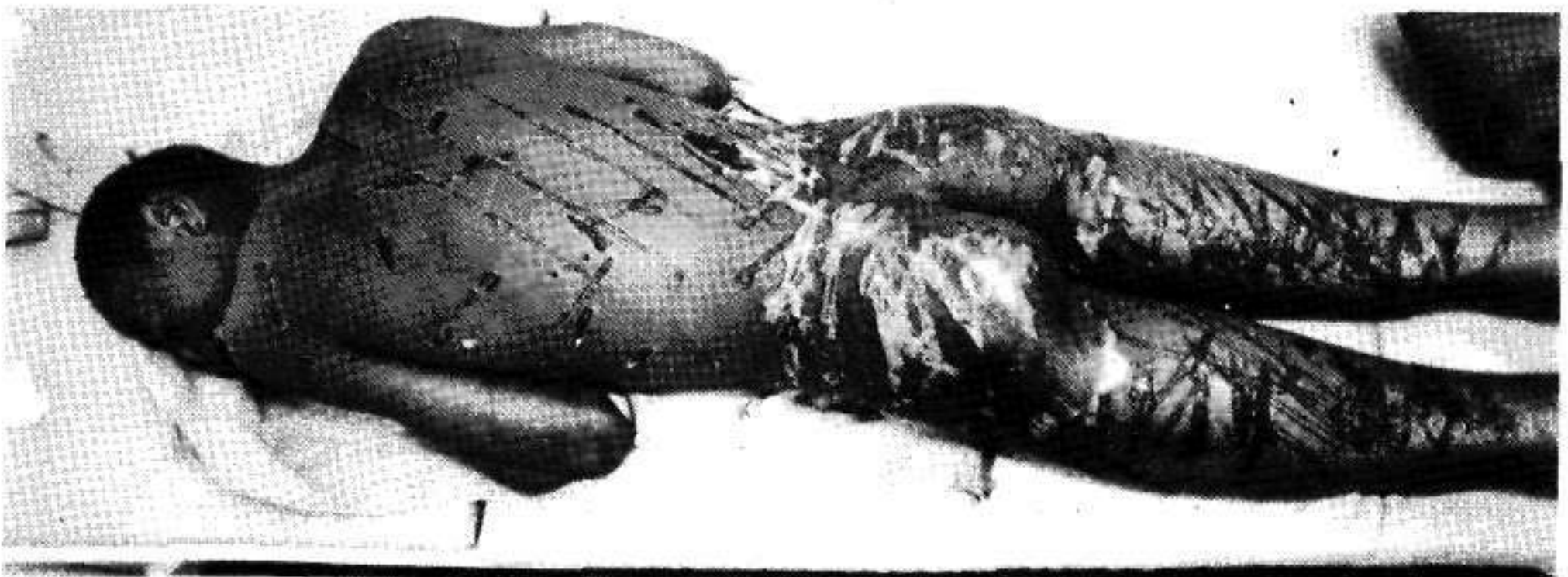
#### **Audrey describes the history that led up to the vigilante situation**

##### **Thabong Township 1983**

As was the case everywhere else, dissatisfaction was brewing in the schools, particularly Teto High School where the headmaster and his white staff appear to have been, and probably still are, a cause of discontent. The students felt that the staff were not qualified to teach. On top of that the headmaster had expelled some 120 pupils.

Students started to boycott classes in protest. They took up the nationwide demands for democratically elected SRC's, the abolition of corporal punishment and an equal education for all South Africans.

During that year too, students carried their protest into the wider political context. They tried to persuade their parents not to vote in the community council elections. Nevertheless, the community council elections proceeded. Community councillors were elected but a



*A victim of the Thabong vigilantes*

*photo: Gill de Vlieg*



low poll was recorded.

The final ingredient to the seething pot of discontent was the November 1984 matric exam results. They were very poor. Many many students failed and pupils felt that the system of marking was corrupt.

"Then came the real riots," explained one resident of Thabong. Unrest spread from school to school.

In January 1985 the parents formed the Thabong Parents Association to try and deal with the situation. They approached the community councillors to meet with them and the DET to resolve some of the problems. A meeting between a representative of the DET, the headmaster of Teto, the councillors and the parents association was arranged for Wednesday February 27. But the meeting never materialised.

On Monday February 25 a child was shot dead by a community councillor — see extracts from his mother's affidavit.

"Children took to the streets", said another resident relating the story. *Councillors hired vigilantes for protection and the reign of terror developed from there.*

### **Audrey offers an explanation for the appalling state of affairs**

*'It would seem the councillors are determined to keep the community subservient to them. They hope in this way to prevent the community from rising against them and demanding their resignation as has happened in so many parts of the country. In this way they think they can prevent the civic association, COSAS, UDF and other organisations from organising effectively.*

*'The police appear to have abdicated their responsibility. They do not want to be seen to be the oppressors. Rather have the councillors do that job. The community, however, is united against this brutality. They are starting a petition asking people to sign to call on the councillors to refrain from assaulting people or to resign from the council.*

*This community has tried to redress their problems peacefully. They have gone to the police to no avail; they have caucussed what to do next; they are organising a petition and have called on the Black Sash. But the Sash cannot solve their problems. We can publicise them. We can assist in getting legal representation but in the end they will have to solve their problems for themselves.'*

### **Results from Black Sash investigations**

Subsequent to the open day report-back on June 7, Audrey explained what developments had taken place as a result of the Black Sash investigations in Thabong.

*'By July 4 we were not aware that anyone had been arrested or prosecuted for the assaults that we had publicised. We gathered together some 50 statements made by Thabong residents and presented them to the Attorney General in Bloemfontein. The Divisional Commissioner of Police in the northern Free State declined to attend this meeting. The Attorney General was affected by the photographs of assault victims. He undertook to take up the matter.'*

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## **Statements**

- 1 My name is J M. I am an adult woman, 52 years old and reside at 1730 Thabong.
- 2 At approximately 20h00 on May 1 1985 I was going to my sister's house to ask for her help because my husband was ill. I was at the corner of my street when a white combi drove down the street. *There were about eight men in the combi. They all climbed out of the combi armed with sjamboks. Without saying anything to me they began to beat me with the sjamboks. No one else was on the street with me. They beat me on my back and thighs and my left arm. I do not know the men but I knew the combi. I do not know if I would recognise them again. I do not know why they assaulted me.*
- 3 I was so badly beaten that I became confused and fell onto the ground. I became unconscious and only regained consciousness at about 04h00 on the following morning. I was bleeding from the sjambok wounds and also from my vagina even though I had been on medical treatment and I had stopped menstruating. I continued to bleed internally for three weeks.
- 4 I managed to get myself back to my house. My husband was very worried about where I had been. He was shocked to see me. At 08h00, my sister took me to the doctor. He is a white doctor called Dr Edelstein. He practices with his partners in Welkom. He gave me an injection and treated my wounds. He asked if I had laid a charge against my assailants — but I told him that I had not been able to as I did not know who they were.
- 5 To this day I have not laid a charge against them. One of Dr Edelstein's partners is my usual doctor.



- 1 I am an adult woman resident at 3957 Thabong Location, Welkom, Orange Free State.
- 2 I am the mother of Teboho Bakopane, a 15-year-old boy. He was born on February 24 1970.
- 3 *On February 25 1985 my son Teboho went to see a house in the township that had been burned down. I think the house belonged to a member of some organisation. My son was not involved in the burning of the house and I do not know who started the fire in the house. My son just went there the next day out of curiosity to see the house.*
- 4 *A crowd had gathered outside the house. While my son was standing amongst the crowd, a white combi arrived. As far as I am aware the combi belongs to one of the community councillors in the township, a Mr Phakathi. Some men got out of the combi. The men were armed with knobkerries and sjamboks. When they began to beat some of the boys amongst the crowd the crowd started to run into a nearby yard. My son hid in the toilet.*
- 5 *When my son came out of the toilet, he was shot by one of the councillors and died instantly. His*





Audrey Coleman takes statements from victims of vigilantes in Thabong

photo: Gill de Vlieg

friends came to tell me and I ran to the scene. The white combi was still there but drove off immediately I arrived. It came back again while I was there and five or six men jumped out and started to beat the young boys again with sjamboks.

6 This incident occurred at the house of Mr

Nkwandla who is also a councillor.

7 The police came when I phoned them from a nearby house. They took my son's body to the police mortuary.

8 I have not laid a charge against anyone. Nobody has been to offer me any explanation or apology.

## Causes of opposition to Black Local Authorities

During the campaign against the BLS's, just after the Act was passed towards the end of 1983, independent civic associations that supported the UDF gave the following reasons for their opposition to the BLA's:

- They were imposed on people without their consent
- They were an attempt to strengthen the policies of separate development and to divide rural and urban people
- The bodies had no power to change conditions in the townships.

Nevertheless, community council elections were held in November 1983. The combined average percentage poll for all adults eligible to vote throughout the country was only 8%. Undermined by this pathetic turnout, the Government went ahead with the appointment of councillors.

Once in power, opposition to councillors increased. Their unpopularity stemmed from the following actions.

- Between March and September 1984, 14 councils announced rent hikes at a time of rapid inflation and rising transport costs.
- High electricity and water bills were a cause of dispute, dissatisfaction and in some cases,

disbelief. For example, in Soweto residents complained that their meters were not read at all. Yet they received high bills which they said did not reflect their actual consumption.

- Councillors often refused to allow community organisations to use halls. In areas like Alexandra and Vaal, church councils that allowed civics to use their halls were threatened with the cancellation of their leases.
- Most councillors voted themselves large salaries, cars, houses and luxury council chambers.
- Many councillors were corrupt. For example, in the Vaal three councillors have been charged with demanding bribes. Others such as Kinikini in Uitenhage, who was subsequently killed, waged a campaign of total terror against residents. For example, residents of Kwanobuhle in Port Elizabeth told a Sash member that Kinikini shot at people, or he threw chemical bombs at them. One of these; which was allegedly thrown by him and intended for a particular youth, landed on a sleeping child and killed him.