



APDUSA VIEWS

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THE NEED TO UNDERSTAND!

***A CALL TO SOUTH AFRICANS
OF INDIAN DESCENT***

A NOTE TO THE READER

This issue of APDUSA VIEWS is based on a lecture delivered on 4 June 1990 at an open APDUSA meeting which was held in the Church of Holy Angels in Pietermaritzburg.

In many respects the contents of the lecture will sound odd to the politically-conscious reader who is not of the strife-torn areas of Natal. It will appear to that reader as if he is seeing the fashions of a decade ago being worn today. Quaint and antiquated. Fundamentals stated and fought for half a century ago are now being re-stated as if for the first time.

The lecture was principally directed at South Africans of Indian descent who were still living in the shadows of a terrifying experience which reached a peak during the months of March and April this year. Decades of careful planning and building unity was in real danger of being destroyed. The lecture was directed at a badly shaken people who had taken the comradeship of the African oppressed for granted. There was a strong dose of idealism in the belief. And then the nightmare!

The ideas and approach contained in the lecture formed part of APDUSA's contribution to counter the alarm and fear which had gripped the Indian people. The decision to print and publish a pamphlet based on the lecture was founded on a number of considerations:

1. The contents and tone reflect the environment and atmosphere prevailing at that time. It is, therefore, a record.
2. It is hoped that since calm has been restored, people will read this pamphlet and see themselves reflected in the contents and, hopefully they will act differently should there be a recurrence of real-life nightmare.
3. To show how fragile unity can be in times of stress. Perhaps, it may open the eyes of the ultra-leftist who sees in society only two actors, the proletariat and the bourgeoisie and who sweeps the reality of racial kraals set up by the ruling class and the insidious policy of divide and rule under the carpet.

It is said that a gardener's work is never ever finished. Much more so is the case of building unity. The process of building unity is countered continuously by the enemies of unity. With weak foundations, the super-structure sways precariously every time there is a gust of racist wind. And it was a racist ill wind which blew from the mouth of the President of the UDF, Mr Archibald Gumede, in the recent television show. This disgraceful episode will be dealt with in the next issue of APDUSA VIEWS.

INTRODUCTION

South Africa is experiencing a series of severe convulsions. There is turmoil everywhere. No part of South Africa has escaped the shocks and vibrations. The once peaceful African townships around Pietermaritzburg have been converted into terrifying, bloody battlefields in which many thousands have been killed, maimed and crippled. Many thousands more have been mentally scarred for life. The killers have lost the ability to distinguish armed from unarmed persons; men from women; young from old and aged and adults from babies. All have become victims. None have been spared because of their age, helplessness or innocence. While Pietermaritzburg and its surrounding areas cannot be matched in the intensity, duration and horror of the violence, all parts of South Africa have in varying degrees experienced violence.

UGLY HEAD OF RACIALISM

In all the turbulence that has engulfed certain parts of South Africa, the ugly head of racialism has been raised again.

In Natal, especially areas like Pietermaritzburg, Durban, Stanger, Isipingo, etc, *fear* has gripped members of the Indian community. During March this year, there was constant fear that the Indian people were going to be attacked by mobs of looters, robbers and killers from the African community. The fear, in turn, triggered off a wave of racialism against the African people. The racialism was publicly announced by a tiny minority of gun-toting "cowboys" who had developed an itch to try out their newly acquired guns on living targets. These creatures would, no doubt, be honoured if they were invited to a lynching party in which the star would be some innocent and unwary passerby.

ROLE OF RUMOURS

The fear that prevails among the members of the Indian community has been created and fuelled by *rumour*. Rumours take the form of reporting something that is supposed to have happened or is about to happen when there is no basis in fact or truth about the occurrence. Rumour is passed on from person to person without the pedlar of the rumour taking the trouble to establish the truth or otherwise of the report.

In Natal, especially in Pietermaritzburg, during March and April this year, there was a large number of very frightening rumours. Panic seized the Indian people. That, in turn, fathered the most bizarre rumours. APDUSA investigated all major rumours and found *not one of them to be true!!* It is not possible for any person to live and function in an environment where the atmosphere is laden with alarm and dread. No people can survive if they allow their lives to be governed by rumour. For then everything deteriorates. There is no concentration; the quality of work suffers; there is gloom, misery and unhappiness. This of necessity must affect children who are usually perceptive about changes in the home setting. They get scarred for life.

In order to survive people must take a grip of themselves. They need to understand exactly what is going on. This they must do *rationally*. Then they can take suitable steps to deal with rumours by appealing for calmness; to scotch rumours at the very outset and should the situation demand it, to take adequate steps for their defence.

THE NEED TO UNDERSTAND

It is vital to know and to understand what is going on. There must be answers to question like:

- * Why is there a sudden increase in violence?
- * Where do the rumours come from?
- * Are the members of the Indian community *really* in danger of a massive attack from the African people?
- * Why would the African people want to attack the Indian people?
- * Are not isolated incidents blown out of proportion?

We believe that *understanding* the situation is the *first step* in the process of solving the problem. Without this understanding we cannot even *begin* to hope for a solution. Rather, people will sink in the dark pits of blind fear, blind hatred and blind reaction.

Our contribution in this lecture is to attempt an explanation of the convulsions racking this country. It is also a plea for compassion and understanding. It is an appeal for calm and rational decisions.

THE SOUTH AFRICAN SCENE

1. The conflict between the oppressed people and the oppressors took a dramatic turn since the nationwide opposition and rejection of the tricameral circus in 1984. The rising militancy of the people enabled them to tackle head-on a number of issues which had been gnawing them. The refusal of the people of Soweto to pay rent is a case in point. It was also at about this time that the ANC made the call to make the townships ungovernable.

The oppressors hit back by declaring a number of states of emergency. The population remained uncowed. This situation arose *not* because the ruling class did not try to make it happen otherwise. Indeed, the rulers did try — with sjamboks, tear-gas, rubber bullets, birdshot, buckshot and ordinary bullets; they used killer dogs and they used physical presence of the armed might of the state.

Notwithstanding all these techniques designed to terrorize a people, resistance and militancy went on without let-up or abatement.

2. It was also during this period that political intolerance of rival bodies in the liberatory movement made its appearance in a sinister and repulsive manner. Whereas in the past intolerance took the form of overheated debates, howling down opponents or breaking up meetings, in the mid-1980s intolerance expressed itself by denying people basic civil liberties (the right to organise, freedom of thought and conscience, etc) and later by assassinating political opponents. People got killed because they differed with and criticised organisations. Murderers who donned the mantle of freedom-fighters, whilst demanding for themselves and their organisation the right to organise and to express views different from those of the government, were busy signing death warrants against those who differed with them. These murderers are still at large and, no doubt, occupy high positions in political organisations. Will they ever be brought to justice? We believe that they will, if not during their lifetime, then posthumously. After all who honestly believed that “Almighty” Joseph Stalin would be discredited within two years after his death?

The intolerance which officially began with the UDF-AZAPO conflict in 1985 soon spread throughout the country. The “necklace”, the petrol bomb, the pistol and the panga became the tools to resolve political differences instead of debate, discussion polemic, research and study. Assassination became the ethos.

3. Since 1976, the student population in the African townships has been engaged in a continuous battle with the rulers and their vigilantes. By the latter half of the decade of the 1980s, that layer of our population, numbering millions, became South Africa's angry young people — a seething mass of resentment — militant and non-collaborationist through and through. Prolonged school boycotts became a common feature. This was due partly through misguided notions of struggle which produced the slogan of *liberation before education*. The other part of the responsibility lay with a section of the leadership of the liberatory movement. This section, in essence petty bourgeois, *incited* students to stay away from school with lies and flattery. The students were told that they were the vanguard of the struggle in place of the working class which allegedly abdicated its leadership role. Those scoundrels, in the name of the struggle, while they were safely ensconced in their money-making professions, had no compunction in ruining the lives of young and impressionable people. They must not be allowed to get away with what they have done.

The army of youth, out of school and out of work, wields a tremendous influence in the African townships.

4. While the blood of the African people has flowed freely since 1652, the last two decades of the 20th century has witnessed violence reaching unprecedented heights. *A whole people has become drenched in violence*. Whereas previously violence in the African townships was mainly the work of tsotsis and known underworld gangs, today in certain areas like Pietermaritzburg, Inanda and Port Shepstone, violence has journeyed from door-to-door like a pedlar of death. Most, if not all, families are involved in violence — either as victims, perpetrators or eyewitnesses. The ordinary peace-loving people have been driven to violence either in defence of themselves, their families, their property or as people craving for revenge for the death of a dear one. *Overnight*, thousands of guns of all shapes and sizes found their way into those afflicted areas.

Armed robbery has become an every-day occurrence. Robberies of banks and building societies are usually carefully planned by professional robbers who have getaway cars and hideouts. They engage in a minimum of violence. For them killing is unnecessary trouble. As opposed to them are a new breed of robbers. They are usually on foot. They probably cannot drive cars. These newcomers have earned the reputation of coupling robbery with senseless murder. They are the brutalised products of township violence. They are the *psychopaths*.

For a long time the violence was contained in the townships. Those not living in the townships came to know of the violence mostly through newspapers. But in the last six months, that violence has spilled over from the townships into the so-called White, Indian and Coloured areas of Pietermaritzburg. There has been a marked increase in armed robberies of shops, minibuses and motor vehicles.

The main victims of the violence have been and still are the African people. But there is a limit to what can be robbed from the poorest section of the population. Hence the armed robbers and killers turned to the better-off sections of the community. Robbers are not concerned about *race*. Only two questions bother them:

- (a) How wealthy is the proposed victim?
- (b) How easy is it to rob that victim without getting caught?

5. Add to all the above the following events:

- (a) The release of long-term political prisoners like Walter Sisulu, Nelson Mandela and others.
- (b) The unbanning of the ANC, PAC and the Communist Party.
- (c) The political independence of Namibia.
- (d) The legalising of protest marches and demonstrations.

We invite the reader to imagine the impact of all these events on the minds of the oppressed people of South Africa. Our people have been oppressed for so long and under such inhuman conditions that many lost all hope for any significant change which could affect their lives for the better. So wretched is their plight that any slight change is regarded as a momentous event. All around them there is unemployment, poverty violence and misery. There is a state of emergency and there is the army and police running riot. There is intimidation and widespread detention of opponents of the government.

In the midst of all these degrading and dehumanising happenings, there is the sudden announcement of the release of certain long-term political prisoners and the unbanning of organisations. The suddenness and dramatic nature of the events sent powerful waves of elation, excitement and wild expectations in the people. For so long there had been no hope; for so long the road seemed endless and for so long the interminable sacrifices, and always in blood, these events therefore could only mean that liberation was at hand.

Liberation means different things to different people. To a starving man, a loaf of bread everyday means freedom. To a taxi operator owning his own minibus means freedom. To a NAFSOC member freedom means owning a factory and making a fortune from the labour of his workers. That is why it is so necessary for freedom or liberation to be defined for a whole people in a political programme or charter.

Whilst most people channelised their excitement and reaction to discussion and speculation, by turning up in large numbers to marches and rallies to listen to and to catch a glimpse of leaders who had become household words, a minority were unable to cope with the intensity of the events. This minority had reacted in an illogical but understandable manner. There was the case of the domestic assistant who believed that because Nelson Mandela was released, she would be given the house of her employers. Robbers justified their illegal action on the grounds that they were entitled to rob because the ANC was unbanned! One could go on recounting such incidents. It does emphasize how little we know of the secret hopes nursed by individuals — hopes that made life bearable. These hopes, some pathetic, some very sadly funny and others sick and grotesque.

FLOOD OF REFUGEES

Prior to the escalation of the war in Edendale, Pietermaritzburg in March this year, there were according to *Operation Hunger* some 70 000 refugees from the surrounding areas. Following the massive offensive launched by Inkatha the flood of refugees swelled by another 50 000. Pietermaritzburg was the obvious place for the refugees. Some lived with relatives in “peaceful” areas; some with relatives at the latter’s place of employment; some in refugee camps; others had no place to go. You saw them in twos and threes near shops and at bus stops, hoping for work, casual jobs, or handouts.

Apart from those fleeing violence, there are a large number who came to the cities to escape starvation from the impoverished rural areas. The peasants, both actual and landless, are confined to the reserves to which no land was added to make allowance for the increase of the population. Limited land cannot absorb unlimited people. Therefore, there is only starvation in the reserves. In the towns and cities there is wealth and affluence. The refuse bins in the cities of South Africa are easily the richest in Africa — content-wise. In a city, a person can find work or he can beg or he can steal.

THE BOILING CAULDRON

If you, the reader, have had the patience to read thus far, you would have acquainted yourself with the ingredients of a highly explosive situation. You would have seen unfolding before you the sorrowful plight of a people who have no home in the land of their forefathers and of their own birth; the anguish of a destitute people in the midst of glittering wealth. You would have seen a people who are victims of the horrors of an insensate war. The burden of grief resulting from the death of loved ones becomes unbearable. What of the effect of the destruction of homes and the pitifully small items of furniture bought after saving for years? We have before us a people who live in fear of death *all the time*; a people denied justice and the protection of the law. They have reached the stage when they will joyfully embrace poverty if only that be in peace; they will happily endure super exploitation if only they can work. If, as a result of all these circumstances, certain acts of violence take place, we should show understanding. Is it surprising to find a man bitter and craving for revenge where his family has been wiped out by the violence? What sort of behaviour is to be expected from a person who is unemployed, has no roof over his head, has not had a decent meal for days, is probably sick with fever? Should such a person stare at your house which has all the comforts denied him, must you become hysterical like that brave whites-only Mark Cornell when some unemployed people looked hard at his long, black and sleek Mercedes Benz?

We repeat that we are living in turbulent times. The people who are suffering most and who have suffered most are African people. The other sectors of society — the White, the Coloured and Indian people don't know what real suffering is. These communities cannot seriously believe that when the whole country is a bubbling cauldron, they can continue living in islands and pockets of peace and serenity?

LET THE INDIAN PEOPLE PULL THEMSELVES TOGETHER

The Indian people must think clearly and look at matters rationally. Every time there is a robbery, a murder or a rape, it is senseless to say: "Look at what the Africans are doing to us." It would be far better to ask: "Do members of the Indian community not commit murder, rape or robbery?"

It is wrong and dangerous to convert every criminal act into a *racial act* or an "African versus Indian" situation. We have said before: criminals do not look at the racial origin of their victims before they act. They look for easy victims who have things that they can steal.

1. We know that in recent weeks there are members of the Indian community who are thinking of leaving the country for good. That is what ordinary folk contemptuously refer to as “joining the chicken run.” When people want to bolt, there is little one can do to stop them. It is better for them to go! Rather that, than to have one’s ears assailed by a litany of “belly-aching” — about how he is worried about the future of his children (it’s always the *children’s* future, never his own!); about how the Africans are “unfair” to the Indians; about how “all his life” he was “kind” to the African people, etc, etc, *ad nauseam*. To such people we say: *good riddance!*

2. For every attack on a member of the Indian community, there are hundreds if not thousands of acts of friendship, courtesy and kindness by members of the African community towards the Indian people. If one takes all the outlying districts of Pietermaritzburg into account, then there are hundreds of thousands of African people living there. The members of the Indian community constitute a very small minority. Yet if you tally the number of attacks on members of the Indian community it would be a tiny fraction of a fraction of the people involved. This proves that the overwhelming majority of the African people have no hatred or hostility towards the Indian people.

3. All the political organisations of the people — Unity Movement, AZAPO, ANC and PAC are continuously advocating unity and condemning racialism. Even Inkatha, in spite of Buthelezi’s frequent threats against the Indian people, dare not attack the Indian people. If he does, the international community will react in horror at racial pogroms (riots) in this day and age. Buthelezi will not be entertained in any of the aid-giving countries in the world.

4. The Indian people must be told, in no uncertain terms, that unity between African and Indian can only take place on a basis of complete equality. It is not enough to state: “I believe that the African people are the equals of any other human beings.” The belief in unity has to be shown in deed and proved in practice. Where there is an employer-employee relationship, the Indian employer must at all times accord the African employee the respect and dignity due to such employee as of right. You do nobody any favour by treating a person as a human being.

The other day I read an advertisement in a newspaper by a domestic assistant who was looking for employment. At the end of the advertisement, I read the following words:

“No Indians please.”

What do these words mean? You pause and you think and you try and put yourself in the position of that domestic assistant. You try and imagine what sort of unpleasant experience she underwent at the hands of a former Indian employer. It must have been awfully ugly for her to become so bitter that she would never want to work for Indians again!

THE RIGHT OF SELF-DEFENCE

Violence is not a new feature in our society. It has been and is always present. What is new is the level and quality of violence and the source of that violence. Apart from vigilantes, warlords and secretly organized death squads (which has the blessings, if not actual involvement of the ruling class or a section of it), there is the lumpen proletariat, that is, the unemployed organised into criminal gangs. Like parasites, they live off the workers, the professional class and the small shop-keepers. This element sodden with cheap liquor and incited by promises and visions of attractive booty, can very easily be whipped into a frenzy and can, with equal ease, form into a mob of 50, 100 or even 200. They can be murderous and very destructive in a senseless way. What does one do?

We are not romantics. We don't preach the turning of the other cheek. Nor do we advocate Gandhism which holds that when attacked physically, one should not retaliate but should endeavour to put the aggressor to shame by means of persuasion and patience. There can be no debate or difference on this score. But *how* that is to be done needs careful and calm thinking. There is much talk of "Neighbourhood Watches" and we are told one is working particularly well.

A Neighbourhood Watch is a tool — like any other tool. If it is used wisely it can provide safety and security without doing harm to innocent people. In unsafe hands this organisation can very easily be converted into a body of bullies, thugs and in the end of killers. It can become the hotbed of racism directed against the African people. This situation we must combat at all costs. Apart from committing terrible injustices, it can give birth to a full-blown race riot. The Indian people have not yet lived down the memories of the 1949 riots, even though many of them were not born at that time. Another race riot can do irreparable damage to the cause of building a single nation in South Africa. Defensive action must be taken against robbers, rapists, killers, etc, and *not* against a *racial* group. Moreover, it is not the function of a Neighbourhood Watch to arrest, charge, try and punish a person who has committed a crime.

Once a people or a group of people have become stabilized, i.e., when panic and alarm have disappeared, they can be put to good work in combatting racism and fear in the larger community.

Events must be put in their proper perspective. It must be explained to the people that for every one member of the Indian community who is attacked, killed or robbed, there are thousands of African people suffering the *same fate* at the hands of the *same kind* of robbers, killers and attackers. What of the Whites in the farming areas who have been the victims of robbers?

This is proof that there is no anti-Indian conspiracy. Every one suffers.

HOPE IN THE FUTURE — A MUST!

Emigration, i.e., going to live in another country, is *not* an option available to the majority of the people. There is no doubt that all people would like to escape from a country which is experiencing escalating violence.

But they cannot afford the cost of emigrating. Even if they could, where would they go? They will not know where to start. How will they ever get through the mountain of paper work and the maze of formalities? And then too, which country will accept them? We repeat: *that for the vast majority, emigration is out!* This country is where they were born and it is here where they will die and be buried.

Those who have no alternative but to remain must do the sensible thing, i.e., make this country liveable for all its inhabitants. Our land is a beautiful land. There are few places on this earth or in the solar system for that matter, which can match our country in beauty. That will account, partly, for the large populations from countries in the northern hemisphere which have settled here permanently.

Our land is also a land of abundance with enough riches, both on the surface and below to feed, clothe and care for all its inhabitants. With its high degree of industrialisation and productive capacity, our country can cast a shadow northwards far in excess of its own size. We need to have hope and confidence in the future of our country and its people. We need to invest in this land — not only with our savings — but also with our time, energy, dedication and love.

All that will be possible if we think and conduct ourselves as South Africans, i.e., as part and parcel of a single nation.

CONCLUSION

Before concluding we need to clarify what we mean by a nation. People tend to use the word incorrectly. You will hear people saying: *He is of the Muslim nation* or *He belongs to the Hindu nation*. Here religions are being mixed up with the concept of a nation. A religion cannot be a nation. Or you will hear people referring to an *Indian nation* when referring to South Africans of Indian descent. That again is *not* a nation. The Indian nation occupies a country in the northern hemisphere called India.

We, in the Unity Movement, have formulated a simple and uncomplicated definition of the *Nation of South Africa*. This definition is to be found in the 1951 *Declaration to the People of South Africa*:

“Who constitutes the South African nation? The answer to this question is as simple as it would be in any other country. The nation consists of the people who were born in South Africa and who have no other country but South Africa as their motherland. They may have been born with a black skin or with a brown one, a yellow one or a white one; they may be male or female; they may be young, middle-aged or of an advanced age; they may be short or tall, fat or lean; they may be long-headed or round-headed, straight-haired or curly-haired; they may have long noses or broad noses; they may speak Xhosa, Zulu, Sotho, English or Afrikaans, Hindi, Urdu or Swahili, Arabic or Jewish; they may be Christians, Mohammedans, Buddhists, or of any other faith. So long as they are born of a mother and belong to the human species, so long as they are not lunatics or incurable criminals, they all have an equal title to be citizens of South Africa, members of the nation, with the same rights, privileges and duties. In a nation it is not necessary that the people forming it should have a common language or a common culture, common customs and traditions. There are many nations where the people speak different languages, consist of different nationalities with different cultures. The United States of America, Switzerland and the Soviet Union may be taken as examples. All that is required for a people to be a nation is community of interests, love of their country, pride in being citizens of their country.”

