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Attention: News Editors

**BRITISH CONSULATE SIX OPINION PIECE BY PAUL DAVID SEPTEMBER 2018**

The United Democratic Front (UDF) was formed on the 23<sup>rd</sup> August 1983 at Rocklands Community Hall in Cape Town. The business session was conducted in the morning where the constitution was adopted. Thereafter the public meeting at which an estimated 20 000 people were present. This mass meeting is still talked about even today. Immediately thereafter the UDF's work in galvanising the opposition to the tri-cameral parliament (TCP) began in earnest. In KZN an estimated 100 000 homes were visited. There were public meetings and rallies almost daily. In one such rally at the Students Union in the Howard College Campus of the UKZN an estimated 20 000 people were present. The attraction was a speech by the Swapo Youth representative.

Of course this rampant and organised opposition to the TCP could not go unchecked. Warrants of arrest of UDF leaders, like Archie Gumede, George Sewpersadh, Mewa Ramgobin, M.J. Naidoo, Billy Nair, Paul David and others were authorised and executed against the first five. I did not make myself available for arrest.

The UDF went to Court and got these warrants set aside. Archie and the others were set free and immediately went underground and in spite of sustained efforts over a few weeks the Security Police were unable to execute the new warrants.

In spite of difficult working conditions all six of the UDF leaders were back in harness doing house visits to convince people not to support the TCP.

Early in September 1984 the six were in hiding in La Mercy and stayed overnight at the homes of the late Dr. D.V. Naidoo and Dr. Joey Govender. DV and Joey hosted a UDF activist forum and the topic for discussion was how to meaningfully continue the fight against the TCP, arbitrary detentions etc.

A decision was taken to occupy the British Consulate in Durban as a statement against the apartheid government's harsh treatment of its critics and supporters of the demand for a democratic dispensation for all South Africans – Black and White.

And so early in the morning of the 13<sup>th</sup> September 1984, the six of us, Archie, Billy, George, Mewa, MJ and I were driven by Joey and DV to the British Consulate in Smith Street, Durban. The Consul General, Mr. Simon Davey was not available and we were interviewed by Ms Phyllis Orr, Davey's assistant. After much social banter we raised the possibility of our arrest without any charge being framed against us. We then requested the "protection" of the British Government in resisting the arbitrary nature of our arrest. Ms Orr was in a dilemma – she could not refuse our request.

During our 3 months occupation of the British Consulate, representatives of the British Government tried their best to evict us. Some of our guards were down right rude and even threatened to throw us out of the 6<sup>th</sup> floor where the Consulate was located. Others were subtle in their efforts. They pretended to show common cause with the IRA in an effort to influence our decision to leave. One of these guards played the oboe until the early hours of the morning, hoping that this would deprive us of sleep. He was very surprised to hear that I quite enjoyed the Mozart Sonata. No more oboe music! A British opposition M.P. came to visit us and he attempted to persuade us to vacate.

A few weeks into our stay George, MJ and Mewa decided to leave the Consulate in the hope that this would not be noticed. However, they were spotted and arrested and charged with High Treason.

Archie, Billy and I continued the occupation until we were informed of the indictment and we then departed. Archie and I were arrested outside the building and taken to the Durban Court and thereafter to the old Durban Central Prison which was situated on the present site of the International Conference Centre (I.C.C.). The following day Archie and I were joined in Court by the other Treason Trialists,

Albertina Sisulu, Aubrey Mokoena, Ismail Mahomed, Frank Chicane, George, Mewa, MJ, Sisa Njikalane, Sam Kikine, Cassim Saloojee, Duze Ndlovu, Essop Jassat and Gwete. Then began our lengthy quest for bail pending the trial. We were released on bail on very stringent conditions, including house arrest, a few months later. The trial collapsed during the course of the State's case and we were discharged in December 1985.

The conditions in the Consulate were harsh and unfriendly. We were confined to a single private office approximately 7x7 metres. Nothing was done to this office to accommodate us. We got a chemical toilet in and we sealed it off with movable shelves. We slept on the carpeted floor and I taught the others how to use their shoes as pillows. After Archie became ill, he was allowed a foam mattress.

We were denied reading material, but we made use of the Consulate's "library". Books on the sea life on England's East Coast, and the effect of the tides on the West Coast proved interesting but unfulfilling.

The feature of our occupation of the Consulate was how the apartheid Government used this in the case of the Coventry Four. Four South African agents were charged in connection with the theft of nuclear secrets and they were duly charged in the British Courts. They were released on bail when the South African Government gave an undertaking to return them to England for their trial. Now, the British Government could not force us out of the Consulate. Remember we had asked for the British Government's "protection". It was compromised. The South African Government used this situation to prevent the Coventry Four from going to England to face trial. What a disgraceful reaction! The South African Government lost what little credibility it had. It was scandalous for a Government not to keep its solemn undertaking.

There was no bathroom in the Consulate or in the building itself. And so we learnt to bath in a wash basin with a face towel.

There was plenty of time to get meditation lessons from George who also gave new meaning to the incantation “keep still”. On one occasion Simon Davey thought the worst had happened to George and he touched him in his supine position saying “Mr. Sewpersadh, are you alright?” – To which George retorted “I’m fine. Just relaxing!”

After one day into our stay we were denied visitors except with special consent. Helen Joseph, Archbishop Dennis Hurley were some of our guests. Our medical needs were sponsored by Paediatrician Jerry Coovadia and Anaesthetist Farouk Meer and we consulted them whenever we became sick for a lack of news etc.

Adventurous BBC correspondence smuggled recording equipment into the Consulate and the 6 of us were able to give a live interview to viewers in Britain. The BBC team was on the roof of an adjacent building. No sooner was it discovered that employees of the Consulate searched our room. They found nothing incriminating.

Billy, Praveen Gordhan, Alf Karrim and other UDF leaders were left with the task of reporting and justifying our occupation of the Consulate. Not everyone in the organisation was happy with occupying British territory. Of course the British were not the liberation’s struggle ally. In fact, it was complicit in the Black people’s oppression.

The apartheid regime was always considered useful and reliable guardians of Western imperialism. Its uncompromising stance against Communism and Communist States made it an even more palatable ally. So we had no illusions about our entering the Consulate. Upper most in our minds was to highlight the apartheid government’s oppressive policies and arbitrary detentions was one such example. In the end our stay went on without any opposition and we received good wishes from all over the country.

Without a mention of the role of young UDF activists in the consulate saga would leave a huge hole in the narrative. Their presence in the streets surrounding the consulate was very reassuring. They attended to all our needs and this made our stay tolerable. The very idea of the occupation emanated from an activists forum and

it was arranging how those young minds saw the occupation unfolding as a political protest that could embarrass and hurt the apartheid regime and compromise the British Government.

I think we achieved a fair amount from the occupation of the British Consulate. For one, it emphasised the moral high ground which the liberation movement occupied. Our stay forced the hand of the apartheid regime to hastily put together a charge of High Treason which had no substance, merit or justification whatsoever – as evidenced by the State's abandonment of the prosecution of the UDF leaders. Throughout the trial we reiterated our principled stand for non-violent methods for change including the taking up of arms by the Mkhonto We Sizwe was aimed at bringing the regime to the negotiating table with the people's organisation – the African National Congress. CODESA was what we envisaged.

Paul David

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