

**THE
1949 DURBAN RIOTS:
Press Clippings
of
Haji Ahmed Suleman Ballim**



(Compiled by Dr Ismail Vadi / Images scanning by Yunus Chamda)

PREFACE

On 13 January 2022, South Africans may recall the seventy-third year of the 1949 Durban riots. The day may bring back bitter memories of the tragic loss of African, Indian and White lives and the extensive damage to private property. It may trigger reflection on similar and more recent events such as the 1985 Inanda riots and the attempted insurrection in July 2021 in Kwazulu-Natal, Gauteng and Mpumalanga.

On a late afternoon on 13 January 1949, an Indian storekeeper in the Durban market assaulted an African youth named George Madondo. This led later to a further altercation involving a group of Indians and Africans, leaving 62 people injured. All was quiet by that evening. The next day, groups of Africans attacked Indians physically and damaged their residential and business properties, with the consequent rioting continuing for several days thereafter.

The dreadful result was that 142 people (African, Indian and White) were killed and 1 087 others were injured; 58 of whom died later. One factory, 58 stores and 247 dwellings were destroyed, and two factories and 652 stores were damaged.¹ The racist National Party government was forced to deploy 500 army, navy and air force personnel in support of the South African Police. An additional contingent of 200 police from Johannesburg was flown into Durban as reinforcement in the unstable province.²

(*Haji*) Ahmed Suleman Ballim (b.1923), a young and enthusiastic photographer at the time, who lived on Saville Street in Durban Central took a personal interest in the riots. Partly, this was because he was a first-hand witness to the mayhem that followed the assault on the young Madondo on that fateful afternoon in 1949. The shop where he worked in Durban's Queen Street too - like hundreds of others - was damaged and looted. As a photographer though he took the thoughtful initiative of collecting news clippings of those tragic events. These he collated meticulously in his little exercise book, which he preserved for over seven decades until he passed away at the age of 93. Ahmed Ballim must be commended for this historical bequest that he has left to his children.

The horrific violence and the deaths, damages and destruction of the 1949 Afro-Indian riots shocked both the African and Indian communities. It left relations between them severely strained. The newly elected National Party (NP)

¹ Meer, F, "South African Indians: A Historical Perspective" in *Africa Quarterly*, Vol.39 No.3, 1999, pp.116-118.

² See Ahmed Ballim's press clips hereunder.

government that espoused the hurtful policy of apartheid appointed a Commission of Inquiry into the conflict. The African National Congress (ANC) and the Natal and Transvaal Indian Congresses boycotted the Commission and refused to participate in its proceedings, believing that apartheid and race discrimination underlay the racial rioting. They recalled that in the 1948 all-White elections, the NP propagated the slogan, “*Die Kaffirs en Boesmans op hul plek, en die Koelies uit die land*”.³ Instead, the ANC, NIC and TIC responded by sending a joint delegation of African and Indian leaders to calm the situation and to help restore peace. Molvi Ismail Cachalia and Naransamy Naidoo from the TIC, AWG Champion and Moses Kotane of the ANC and HA Poonen and Dr Monty Naicker from the NIC constituted the Congress leadership group that served as peace ambassadors to the riot-torn areas.⁴ On 6 February 1949, the Congress leaders issued a joint statement, which stated:

Whatever the immediate causes which may have precipitated the outburst...(they) are convinced that the fundamental and basic causes of the disturbances are traceable to the political, economic and social structure of this country, based on differential and discriminatory treatment of the various racial groups and the preaching in high places of racial hatred and intolerance.⁵

The racial riots followed historic events such as the African mineworkers’ strike of 1946 and the non-violent Passive Resistance Campaigns organised jointly by the Natal and Transvaal Indian Congresses. Both struggles saw important steps towards non-racial co-operation between Indians and Africans, including smaller numbers of Whites and Coloureds. These campaigns contributed to forging closer working relations among the national political organisations of the oppressed, particularly the ANC and the South African Indian Congress. For instance, the trial of 53 trade union, ANC and Communist Party of South Africa (CPSA) officials and leaders for aiding and abetting the ‘illegal’ African mineworkers’ strike, and the enthusiastic public support for the strikers by the Passive Resistance Councils of the Indian Congresses, solidified relationships among the leaders of the various opposition political groupings.⁶ In reflecting on the impact of the passive resistance campaign on the ANCYL and the ANC itself, Mandela states:

³ Kathrada, A, *Memoirs*, (Cape Town, Zebra Press, 2004), p.103.

⁴ See SAhistoryonline, “The Durban Riots” and Soske, J, “The 1949 Anti-Indian Pogrom”, www.kznhas-history.net/files/seminars/Soske2011.pdf, accessed on 16 September 2020.

⁵ Neame, S, *The Congress Movement: The Unfolding of the Congress Alliance, Volume 3, 1928-1961*, (Cape Town, HSRC Press, 2015), p.341.

⁶ Vadi, I, *Thambi Naidoo and Family: Struggle for a Non-Racial Democracy in South Africa*, (Johannesburg, Ahmed Kathrada Foundation, 2021), p.101.

Led by Dr Dadoo and Dr GM Naicker, president of the Natal Indian Congress (NIC), the Indian community conducted a mass campaign that impressed us with its organisation and dedication. Housewives, priests, doctors, lawyers, traders, students and workers took their place in the front lines of the protest. For two years, people suspended their lives to take up the battle...I often visited the home of Amina Pahad for lunch, and then, suddenly, this charming woman put aside her apron and went to jail for her beliefs. If I had once questioned the willingness of the Indian community to protest against oppression, I no longer could...The Indian campaign became a model for the type of protest that we in the Youth League were calling for. It instilled a spirit of defiance and radicalism among the people, broke the fear of prison, and boosted the popularity and influence of the NIC and TIC. They reminded us that the freedom struggle was not merely a question of making speeches, holding meetings, passing resolutions and sending deputations, but of meticulous organisation, militant mass action and, above all, the willingness to suffer and sacrifice.⁷

This laid the basis for the signing on 9 March 1947 of a “Joint Declaration of Co-operation”, commonly referred to as the Dadoo-Xuma-Naicker Pact, which encapsulated a six-point agreement by the Presidents of the ANC, the TIC and the NIC, to work together for universal franchise; economic, trade union and land rights; adequate housing; free and compulsory education; freedom of movement, and the removal of all discriminatory and oppressive legislation. The Doctors’ Pact symbolised the growing unity of the organisations of Indian and African people in struggle.⁸ Mandela affirms that the Doctors’ Pact laid a foundation for future co-operation of Africans, Indians and Coloureds, since it respected the independence of each individual group, but acknowledged the achievements that could be realised from acting in concert. He states it “precipitated a series of non-racial, anti-government campaigns around the country, which sought to bring together Africans and Indians in the freedom struggle”.⁹ The Afro-Indian riots therefore was a major test for this process of growing political unity between the ANC, TIC and NIC.¹⁰ It is to the credit of the broader Congress movement that it continued to build non-racial unity in the 1950s through mass struggles such as

⁷ Mandela, N, *No Easy Walk to Freedom*, (London, Abacus, 1995), pp.118-119.

⁸ Neame, S, *The Congress Movement: The Unfolding of the Congress Alliance, Volume 3, 1928-1961*, (Cape Town, HSRC Press, 2015), p.238.

⁹ Mandela, N, *ibid*, p.125.

¹⁰ Vadi, I, *ibid*, p.102.

the Defiance Campaign of 1952, the Campaign for the Congress of the People and Freedom Charter in 1955, and the historic Women’s March of 9 August 1956 against the ‘pass law’.

The painful memories of the racially motivated violence among Africans and Indians were reawakened last year during the failed insurrection after the arrest of former President Jacob Zuma. This was after Zuma’s imprisonment by the Constitutional Court to fifteen months for failing to co-operate with the Zondo Commission of Inquiry into State Capture. Supporters of Zuma went on a rampage in KwaZulu-Natal and parts of Gauteng and Mpumalanga. South Africa had to deal with the worst possible attack on its constitutional order since its first democratic elections in April 1994. It witnessed five days of mayhem – the loss of over 300 lives, extensive looting of businesses, public violence and massive damage to economic and other public infrastructure in the three provinces.¹¹

The chaos unleashed across the country aimed at forcing the judiciary and President Cyril Ramaphosa to release or pardon Zuma, prevent any further arrests and prosecution of those alleged to be involved in state capture and corruption, and to intimidate the nation at large. Quite inexplicably, the police, army and intelligence services failed the nation in not anticipating the mayhem and timeously defending large communities confronted by mob looting.¹² Unlike in 1949, the police response this time was feeble, and the army was deployed belatedly. President Ramaphosa characterised these tragic events as a failed insurrection that aimed to overthrow a legitimate and democratic government. The consolation was that the people came out in defence of their democracy and at great risk to their personal safety helped to thwart the attempted insurrection. This time ordinary citizens took it upon themselves to protect their communities and properties.¹³ But the damage was done and relations between the various racial groups in society were severely strained again. Sadly, this points to the fragility of our democracy and our nationhood.

Ahmed Ballim’s press clippings in no small measure help us to remember the January 1949 Afro-Indian riots in Durban. It forces upon our consciousness a reflection of the form and character of South African society. In some ways it helps us to come to terms with the historical trauma of that era and of contemporary South Africa. And it beckons us to strive continuously for a non-racial, united, democratic and prosperous South Africa, based upon equality for all.

Dr Ismail Vadi

13 January 2022

¹¹ Faizal, M, “Failed South African Insurrection Televised and Tweeted”, *The Muslim News*, 24 September 2021.

¹² Vadi, I, *The Political Backbencher*, (Johannesburg, Digniti, 2021), p.195.

¹³ Vadi, I, *op cit*, p.196.

53 DEAD: 325 HU IN RIOTS

Indian Families Shot And Burned

STREETS ABLAZE: HUNDREDS FLEE

AT least 52 Indians and Natives were killed—burned ~~or~~ alive, shot or stoned to death—in Durban and surrounding districts last night in one of the fiercest racial battles ever seen in South Africa. More than 325 were injured. Damage is estimated at nearly £250,000.

A YOUNG EUROPEAN, MR. E. WALTERS, OF 9 ROMFORD ROAD, DURBAN, DIED EARLY THIS MORNING FROM A GUN-SHOT WOUND, BRINGING THE DEATH-ROLL TO 53.

WHOLE STREETS OF INDIAN HOUSES AND STORES WERE BURNED DOWN AND LOOTED AT CATO MANOR, JACOBS AND WENTWORTH. THOUSANDS OF NATIVES, CHANTING THEIR BATTLECRY, RAN AMOK IN AN ORGY OF KILLING AND SACKING.

Whole families of Indians were murdered in their homes, and some were held prisoner while their houses and shops were fired.

The fate of hundreds of women and children who escaped the massacre is not known. Some of them fled into the bush, hundreds more were rescued by the police patrols, and police stations in the outer areas were crammed with destitute, homeless and injured refugees.

ARMY, NAVY, AIR FORCE OUT

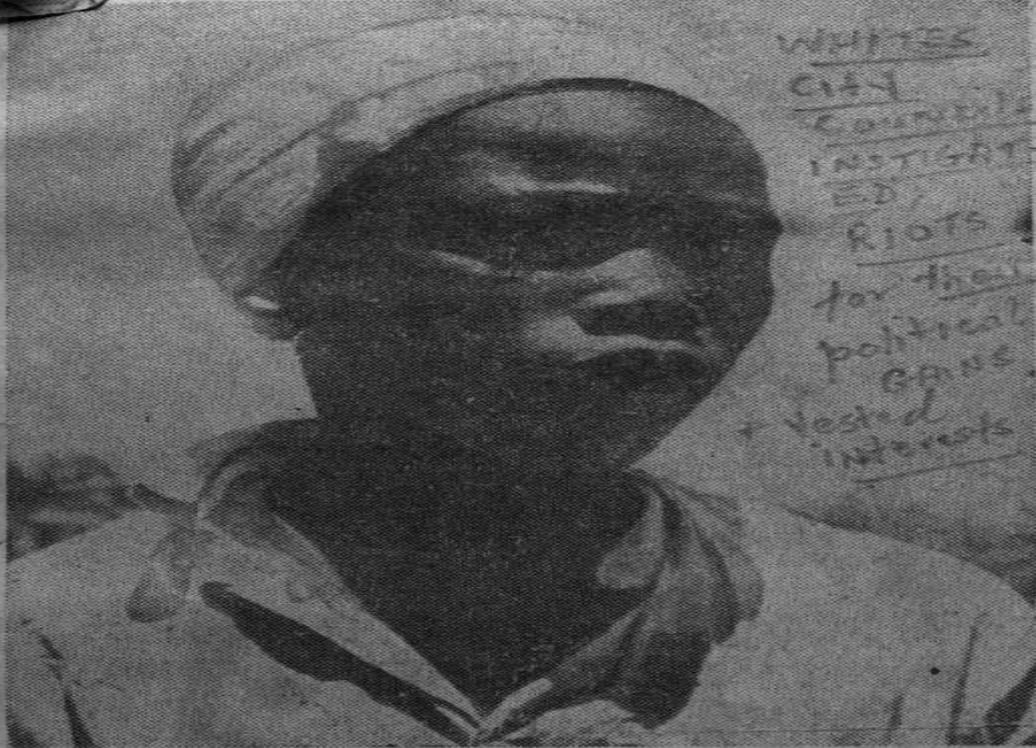
Indescribable scenes faced the staff of King Edward VIII Hospital last night where more than 300 Indians and Natives, some suffering from burns and bullet wounds, crowded in by every available Municipal ambulance, by the Army ambulances and the St. John Brigade ambulance.

They were handled by an emergency staff of more than a dozen doctors working with the entire day and night staffs and using three operating theatres continuously.

For the first time in South Africa's history detachments of the Navy, Army and Air Force—500 in all—were called out to reinforce the South African Police and the Traffic Police to help restore order. Extra police were drafted to Durban from all over Natal.

An emergency council of the Mayor of Durban, Councillor L. L. Boyd, the District Commandant, Major G. Bestford, the Chairman of the Municipal Native Administration Department met with Service chiefs to discuss public safety measures.

All Started Over Him



Umfaan (Alive) Tells His Story

(Sunday Tribune Staff Reporter)

GEORGE MADONDO, the umfaan who was involved in the incident which started the rioting in Victoria Street on Thursday, is not dead as many Natives think.

I spoke to him at his home in Dunbar Road yesterday. He appeared to be in good health. His head was bandaged to

at the time and that the Indian hit him because the prices were high.

He said he was not selling anything; just standing waiting for his brother.

cover a slight wound. He said, through an interpreter, I was standing on a street eating house in Victoria Street waiting for my brother on Thursday afternoon. My back was half-turned to the pavement.

"Suddenly someone grabbed me from behind and pushed me into the eating house window. I saw it was a big Indian who had pushed me. Then the glass broke and I fell with my head bleeding.

"I was shaken and very frightened. I got up and ran a short way. Then I saw other Natives had caught the Indian. I was then taken to hospital."

Madonda said there was no truth in stories that he was selling scent

CHILDREN DIE IN FIRES

THE great majority of Indian stores in Grey Street, Victoria Street, Old Dutch Road, Point Road, First Avenue and Umgeni Road and many in outlying suburbs were smashed.

At Cato Manor Indian buses were burned and every Indian house or shop in Booth Road was destroyed.

A representative of "The Natal Mercury" who visited the area last night counted eight buildings blazing furiously in the space of a few hundred yards. Native looters were moving quickly with their bundles against the glow of the fires.

Refugees

Even then it was necessary for a passenger in the car to shine a torch on the driver continuously to avoid attack by bands of Natives.

Pitiful clusters of refugees, clutching the little valuables rescued from their homes, packed round the patrols of police and soldiers.

In one house in Booth Road Natives attacked, but the family, a storekeeper named Khan and his three sons, barricaded themselves in and three Natives were shot.

Police arrived and brought out the women and children. The men refused to leave.

After escorting the refugees

to safety the police returned to find that two more Natives had been shot but the attackers had fired the store, burning the defenders inside it.

In another house, a number of children were caught by the flames. A Native who voluntarily went in to their rescue was trapped in the house and burned alive with them.

NATIVES SANG AND DANCED

Shortly after sunset Natives from two Native compounds in the vicinity of Jacobs Railway Station closed in on Indian shops in the area.

After smashing nearly every shop window in the area, the Natives attacked the Indians in their houses. Practically every house was ransacked and every Indian encountered was severely assaulted.

Houses were set on fire and men, women and children were beaten up. Several were killed in the fights and a number of Indian families reported relatives to be missing.

Indians told a "Mercury" reporter who toured the area last night that they had shut themselves in since early in the afternoon. Not far from their houses they saw the Natives form into gangs, dancing and singing.

First they attacked every person they met, then smashed every

shop window as they closed in on the village.

After looting the shops and carrying away everything they could, the mobs then turned on the houses. The residents were beaten up, several being stabbed to death. After ransacking the houses, the mobs set fire to them.

A "Mercury" reporter arrived on the scene shortly after one house had been fired. While people stood by waiting for the fire brigade to arrive, dead and wounded people were carried out.

In one of the buildings, reported to have been occupied by 11 Indians, only four were reported to be alive. One charred body was dragged from the flames and it is suspected that several children succumbed in the flames.

Beaten To Death

Shortly after the mobs disappeared in the bushes, the police and fire brigade arrived. Hundreds of Natives were seen carrying away their loot and a few arrests were made. One Native was reported shot by the police and another fatally wounded.

Another Indian, it is reported returned to his home to find the whole place had been looted. While viewing the desolated place, another mob closed in on the house and beat him to death, while a neighbouring house was set on fire.

Indians fled in all directions

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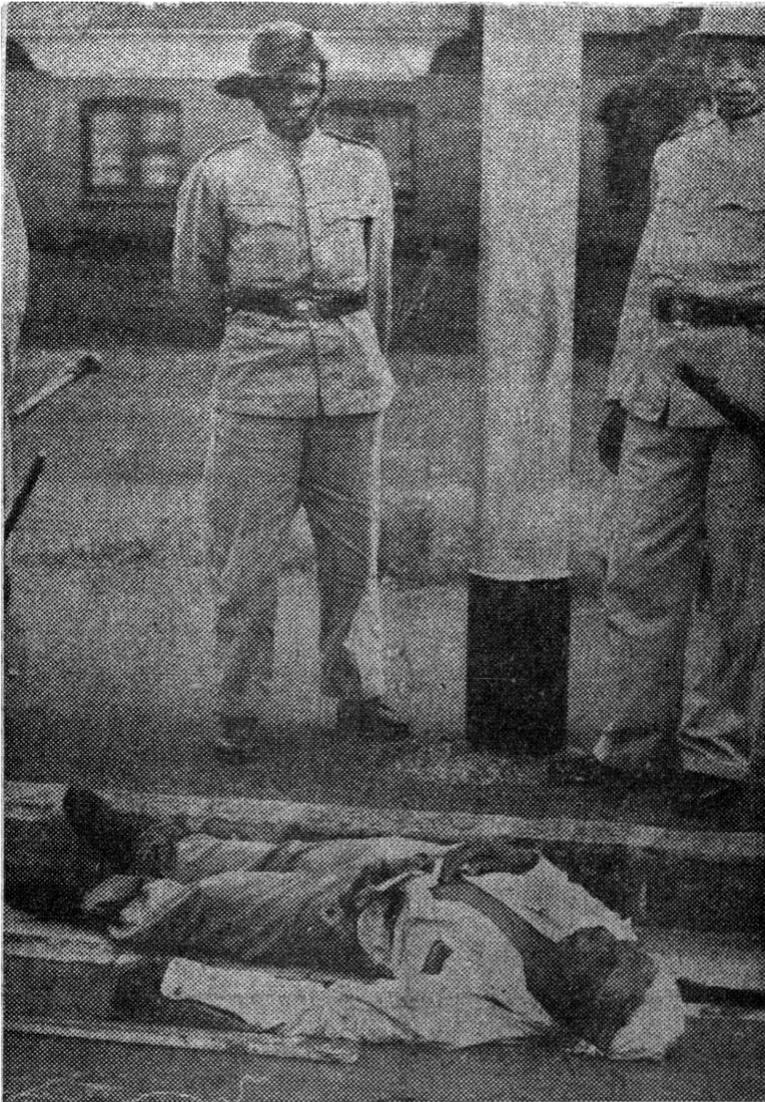


SCENES of desolation and lawless looting followed the rioting Natives in Durban yesterday. A force of 200 heavily armed police arrived by air from Pretoria and Johannesburg in the afternoon, some of whom are seen above. A.C.F. and Permanent Force men helped to quell the "blood drunk" Natives. Above right: S.A.N.F. ratings overpower a rioter. Below left: One of the many groups of rioters helping themselves to Indian shop stocks. Yesterday afternoon, seven Indian houses were gutted by fire. On the right the wreckage of an Indian bus lies in front of a burnt out home. Thousands of Indians trudged wearily to the protection of the nearest police station, like the Clairwood family seen below.





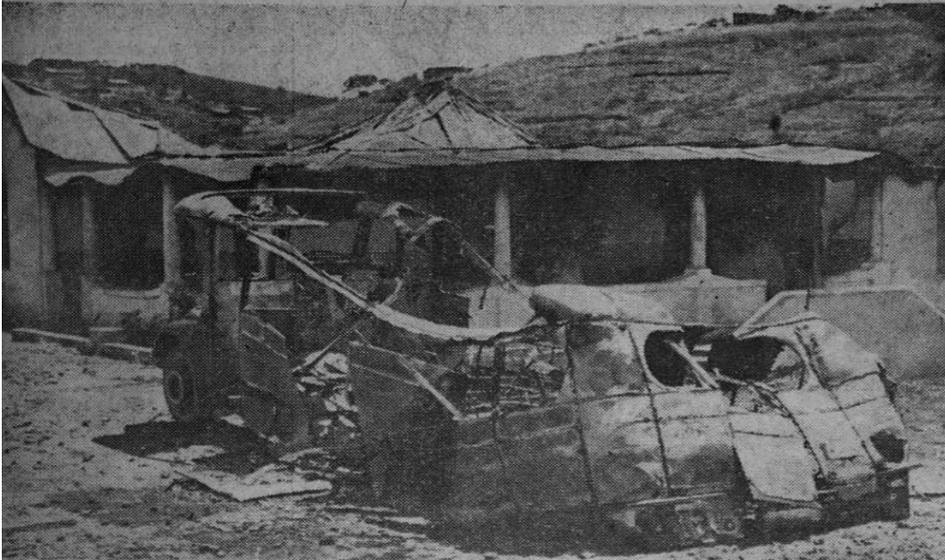
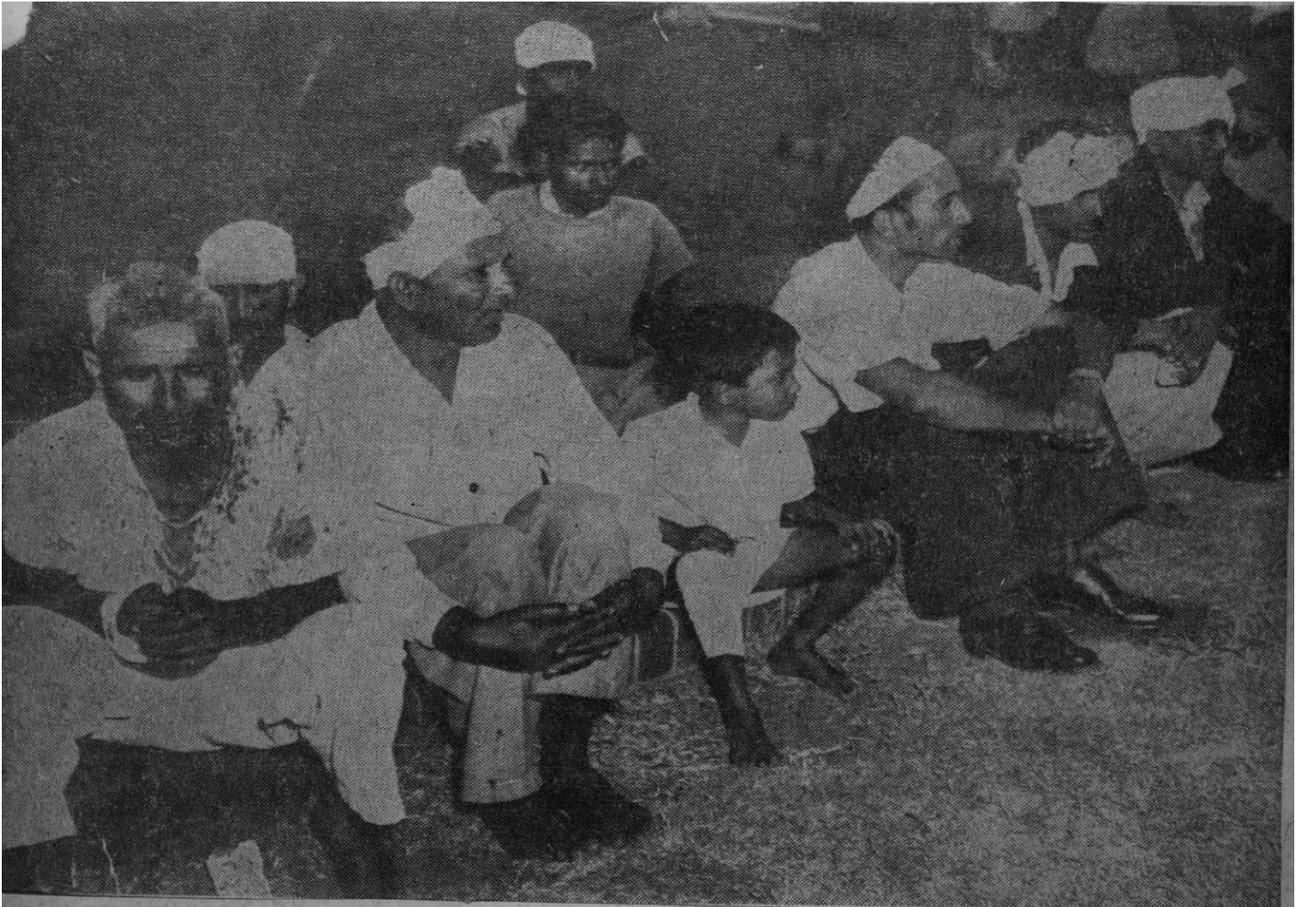
A LOOTER caught in the act. He has his whole body through the broken window of a Grey Street Indian shop, grabbing merchandise from it.



This dead Native was killed after the police had been forced to open fire on a mob which refused to heed their warning when they attempted to break through towards the Indian quarter near the Alice Street bridge. The first volley was fired over their heads without effect. Then the police were compelled to fire into the oncoming attackers.



Answering an urgent call for help, a police patrol car dashes along a road in the Jacobs area this morning past the body of a Native killed in the rioting.



SOME of the casualties of yesterday's rioting in Durban lined up outside the King Edward VII Hospital for treatment. Most of their wounds, as the photographs show, are head injuries.

1949 }
JAN } RIOTS



Laagers have been formed in a number of areas to cope with the hundreds of terror stricked refugees seeking protection. These two pictures show Indians planning to make a getaway from the riot areas to places of safety which have been set up for them.

GETTING READY FOR ACTION



MEN of the Permanent Force filling machine-gun belts with cartridges ready to man the armoured cars, seen in the background, to quell the rioting in Durban last night.



ARMOURD cars patrolling Durban and the city environs helped to bring calm to the town during the day. A lorry load of Naval detachments is seen on the far side of the street.



Early yesterday evening the police clashed with a mob of Natives in Commercial Road and a fierce fight took place before they were dispersed. It was still later in the evening that the situation took on an uglier turn.



LED by a sergeant of the South African Police, Naval officers and ratings filed over rough and hilly terrain to track down 30 Natives who had smashed and beaten up about eight Indians between Malvern and Cavendish yesterday (Saturday) afternoon.



ONE of the many hundreds injured in the several clashes is lifted by police and helpers on to a lorry, which already is packed with injured. This man was shot in the stomach.



POLICE leap over a verandah wall to rescue Indian women and children, who crouch in fear as rioters converge on them.

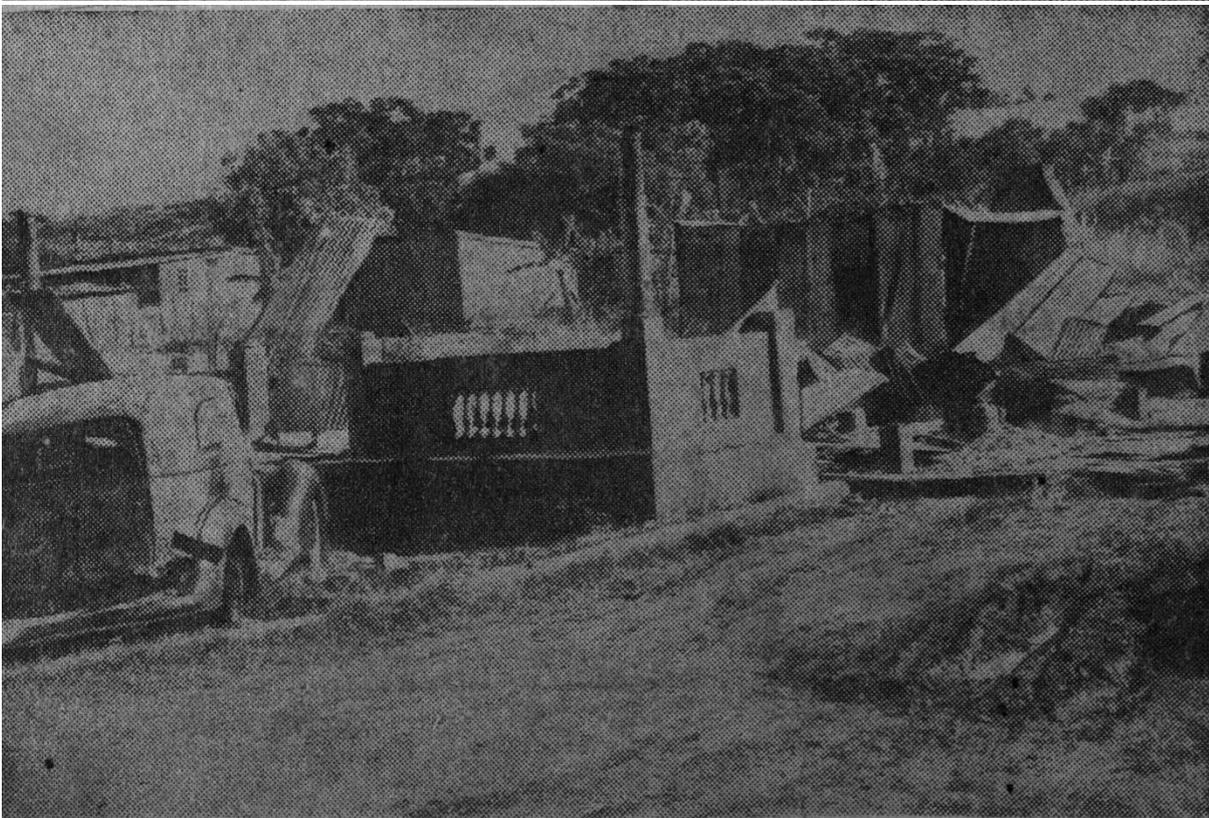


BEWILDERED Indian women flocked to the mosque in Brook Street, in search of sanctuary from the blood-lusting mob. One little girl shows in her tearful face her fear and bewilderment at events.

cemetery



HE joined the rioters, caught in the madness that infects a mob. But for him there will be no more such moments of wild excitement. For him, this is the end.



Frightened Indians returned to their homes from the bush and other places of refuge this morning to find scenes like this. It was here that impis surged into Booth Road, assaulting and smashing as they went. In many cases, occupants failed to escape and were killed.

