

AN8

Irresponsible action triggers off violence

- On the 1st of September 1984 the Lekoa Town Council announced increases in rent and service charges. The areas affected by these increases were Evaton, Sebokeng, Sharpville, Bophelang and Boipatong. Approximately 300,000 people would eventually suffer as a result of these increases.

The Council's announcement of the increase was done without first publishing the proposed rises in the Government Gazette before they were due to be applied. Legal sources have stated that the Council had no right to take such action particularly in view of the fact that by the 1st of September the council had not even taken the first step of submitting the proposed increases to the Department of Co-operation and Development for ministerial approval.

The ill-timed move was made during a period when the area had been hard hit by retrenchment and unemployment and when those earning a reasonable wage were staggering under spiralling prices and high GST. A University of Stellenbosch survey done six years ago in the Vaal triangle showed that at least one quarter of Sebokeng households fell well below the breadline! Rents in the area are amongst the highest in the country and more than half of the households are in arrears in their rents. This represents a total of 35,000 households out of the 60,000 in existence. There are also some 150,000 shacks in the area and people live in constant fear of demolition and removal in both Evaton and Bophelong.

Apart from the economic plight and insecurity of the residents, the council itself was, and still is, unpopular with ample justification. Besides the very low pole which brought them into power, the council would appear to be corrupt. Councillors have been known to allocate bottle store licences to themselves, relatives and friends and others associated with the council. The Mayor of Lekoa Town Council, Esau Mahlatsu, owns a string of businesses and has been, through his position as mayor cornering more of the business market, recently acquiring three garages and a roadhouse.

Government ministers and community councillors have blamed "outside agitators". In a system where legal non-violent protests are not encouraged, violence will surface. If any finger pointing is to be done it must firstly be at a system that does not allow people to participate in the democratic process and secondly at the Council, whose action in the light of the events of the past month can only be termed irresponsible.

- 1) Rents were to be increased by R5.90 for rented houses and R5.50 for bought houses.
- 2) Electricity was to be increased from 52c to 62c a unit and the basic levy was to be increased to R12, an increase of R2.
- 3) Residents who owned their homes would have to pay an additional R2.50 for electricity - the levy was increased from R12.50 to R15.
- 4) Homeowners hoped they would no longer have to face regular increases. However they were still hit by site rentals and service charges. In addition to paying off their houses, people have to pay on average R40 per month excluding electricity.
- 5) The Vaal Civic Association insist that the council knew that people were struggling to pay their rent. The Councils reaction they say was to insure itself against rent losses by introducing a R50 deposit payable by all tenants in Boipelong. Any one who was evicted for rent arrears would forfeit the deposit, residents were told when they queried the new charge.

Opposition to rent increases

Opposition however when it did come, came in the form of organized and legal resistance. Resident and union organizations such as The Vaal Civic Association, the Sharpeville Anti-Rent Committee, the Vaal Women's Organisation, ~~Coasas~~ ^{Coasas} ^{Coasas} Azapo the United Democratic Front and various local trade unions such as the Organge Vaal General Workers Union, Engineering and Allied Workers Union.

At meetings held during the week prior to the outbreak of unrest it was decided that people would stay away from work in protest against the increases.

The days that followed tell a story of horror and violence. People frustrated by their inability to be heard were caught up in events that led to death and destruction. This community during the days under siege was faced with the problem of not being able to seek medical attention for the injured because of the lack of transport to Hospitals and the fear of being arrested; of having to forage for food as shops were looted and depleted and not restocked; not being able to attend work because of the lack of public transport. These factors combined with the police presence could only exacerbate the already worsening situation.

On the Monday morning (3/9/84) the people met in Sebokeng and decided to march to the Houtkop administration offices. A decision to invite the Lekoa Town Councillors to join them was also taken.

Monday 3/9/84

As violence broke out police used teargas and rubber bullets and then live ammunition such as birdshot and buckshot as the day wore on. The police's official figures at the end of the day were 14 dead and 8 police and 32 civilians injured. However residents and church ministers say the real figures were much higher. One estimate was 250 injured (Star 4/9/84).

Police also said they had arrested 35 people - on counts of public violence and housebreaking. Again this figure could be far higher. So far the number of people who have appeared in court on charges of public violence and

Included among the dead were two community councillors, the deputy mayor of Sharpeville, Sam Dlamini was hacked to death and his body burnt. Two youths were apparently shot by Dlamini (Sowetan 4/9/84).

Two people died when they were trapped in burning cars after they had been fire bombed.

In Sharpeville private homes, including the house of a warrant officer, beer halls, administration board buildings, buses and cars were stoned and set alight.

Shops and bottle stores and a beerhall were set alight in Sebokeng and hundreds of cars were damaged by stone throwing youths. A bus depot was gutted and a school and private vehicles were set alight.

In Boipatong the administrative offices, a post office and a councillors house was set alight.

In Bophelong the council offices were burnt down and the house of a police warrant officer who was also robbed of his service revolver.

People of all ages were involved. In a survey carried out by The Star, out of nine people overcome by tear gas, three were middle aged. (Star 4/9/84).

Army helicopters were flying overhead who seemed to be directing the police to new scenes of violence (RDM 4/9/84).

Tuesday 4/9/84

According to newspaper reports the unrest continued on Tuesday. 14 buildings were set alight including ten shops, a garage, post office, clinic and training school. A massive single hostel in Sebokeng was burnt down.

Police announced that the official number of people injured was 48. However the real figure was estimated at about 300 (RDM 5/9/84). Police instructed hospitals in the Sharpeville area not to release casualty figures (Star 4/9/84). Organizations in the area have said that people were too scared to go to hospital because they would be turned over to the police.

Many more people could not get to hospitals because there was no transport. Saspu National spoke to the mother of a 16 year old William Bibi Shange who was shot while coming home from school on 3/9/84. They tried the whole day and night to get transport to take him to hospital but could not. He died a day later.

People could not go to work. Only a token bus service was running and only to the edge of the townships. Few bosses made arrangements for their workers.

The Vereeniging Municipality made special arrangements for workers who arrived for duty to sleep at the local Market Hall (RDM 5/9/84).

With businesses in the townships either closed or burnt down, people could not get food. They would not go to the white towns to get food either because of a lack of transport.

One newspaper quoted an Evaton resident:

"I am afraid to go and loot in the nearby shops, my children are starving. I cannot go to town because buses have been suspended. I do not know how my family will survive".

All councillors houses were placed under police guard (RDM 5/9/84).

Wednesday 5/9/84

A large crowd marched on the Sharpeville townships office carrying white flags and a banner saying "Rent R30, Release Moruti". Moruti referred to a local priest, Rev. Tebogo Moselane, who had apparently been detained the previous day.

Their delegation, led by the Rev. Ben Photolo, demanded that:

- * All rents be decreased to R30, including service charges.
- * All members of the town council resign.
- * Police release all people arrested or detained during the unrest including Rev. Moselane.
- * They be allowed to bury those who have died in the unrest without police interference.

The delegation, which led the crowd included Mongezi Radebe, Mrs. E. Lebona, Mr. Paulus Makwa and Mr. Tshepo Photolo.

They spent about eight hours negotiating with Board officials, two town councillors and a police representative, while a crowd of 3,000 - who stood face to face with a large contingent of armed policemen - waited outside the office all day to hear the result.

The delegation told the press after their meeting that they had agreed that:

- * the proposed rent increases would be cancelled (this was later not the case)
- * the town council would call an emergency meeting to discuss the demand to reduce rents and service charges.

The delegation was told that detainees could not be released because investigations were continuing. Police would not interfere with the burial of those who had died provided they did not turn the funerals into political rallies.

While the meeting was in progress, two more Sharpeville shops were burnt and looted and a third set alight. However quick action by residents saved the shop.

General Constand Viljoen, Chief of the Defence Force toured Vaal townships by helicopter and was briefed on the situation by the police.

Thursday 6/9/84

Minister of Law and Order, Le Grange announces that certain unnamed "individuals and organisations" and not only the proposed rent increase is responsible for the unrest. He says

he does not wish to name them until the government has sufficient information to act against them. He also commented that he would not be surprised if the unrest was "timed" to coincide with the new constitution.

He made this claim after an inspection of townships in the Vaal triangle together with three other cabinet ministers and local councillors. The ministers included FW de Klerk, the MP for Vereeniging, Magnus Malan and Geritt Viljoen.

About 2,000 people blocked the main road through Sebokeng as the Ministers approached them on their tour. The Ministers turned back.

Despite the negotiations of the previous day between a residents delegation and the Vaal authorities, nothing had been finalised.

It was reported in the Star that illegal traders were taking advantage of the food shortage and selling half loaves of bread for 42 cents instead of 39 cents.

Weekend of 15-16 /9

According to the city press 40,000 people attended two separate funerals in Evaton and Sharpeville, on Saturday 15/9/84. 25 people were buried.

In Sharpeville the service was held at the St. Cyprians Church. After the service, mourners ignored the hearses and carried seven coffins high above the heads of the crowds (Star 17/9/84).

They ran through the streets increasing their numbers as they went along. When they finally reached the graves, the crowd formed a circle with a radius of 120m.

Police watched from 100m away in Caspers and other police vehicles. While the coffins were being lowered into their graves, several police vehicles entered the cemetery. Mourners immediately turned to the police, saying the police had killed their people and "we have come to bury our heroes and we want to do it with respect and dignity ... Go away".

About 200 mourners later marched in single file towards the police, shouting, "Kill us as well! Kill us!". The police retreated into their vehicles while the group marched around them before rejoining the people at the graveside.

A foreign television crew was nearly attacked by mourners who called them "boers". Their car was stoned but not damaged.

After the funeral, groups of mourners threw stones at a police armoured vehicle. This led to several tear smoke cannisters and rubber bullets being fired.

One woman, Maria Mohajane, was hit in the face by a rubber bullet.

In Evaton the service was held at Small Farms Roman Catholic Church. Drama began after the funeral when five hippo vehicles stopped buses on the way to the homes of the deceased. Policemen jumped from the vehicles and rushed to the buses where they started sjambokking passengers.

There were screams as people jumped through broken windows. Others were sjambokked as they alighted from the doors after being ordered off the buses.

The off-loaded people were ordered to sit on the ground and were surrounded by sjambok wielding police and the hippos in a laager formation.

Later, several women in church uniform were freed and the rest ordered on to Hippos and taken away. A police spokesperson confirmed the arrest of 204 people, nine of whom were later released. The spokesperson said that 195 would appear in court the following day.

The police spokesperson also said that three buses were hijacked by a small section of the crowd, the drivers robbed and the buses damaged. (RDM 17/9/84).

Weekend 22-23/9

The funeral for Joseph Sithole was held on Sunday 23rd. Sithole, who was a member of the Vaal Youth Congress died in the Sebokeng Hospital after allegedly being beaten up by shopkeepers when he was sent shopping by his family on a Sunday morning. He was wearing a RMC / RElease Mandella Campaign T-shirt which was ripped off him. He was the sole breadwinner of his family.

More than 2,000 people attended the funeral at the Baptist Church in Sebokeng. People outside the church were whipped and others were arrested.

At the cemetery police surrounded the mourners after they had sung the national anthem and were moving to the buses and other vehicles. They fired bullets and chased and whipped mourners. Pandemonium broke loose.

500 mourners were arrested - apparently because they were attending a banned funeral.

Nearby windows were smashed by rubber bullets.

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