

The mid 1986 Crossroads / KTC Squatter Camp Demolitions in wider context

A working paper for Black Sash National Conference *

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1. Political Context

On May 19, 1986 when the Commonwealth EPG returned to Cape Town for a crucial meeting with the RSA cabinet, they could not fail to see flames and plumes of black smoke rising from the satellite camp of Old Crossroads south of D.F. Malan airport, and a few hours later they received news of the SADF cross border raids into Botswana, Zambia and Zimbabwe.

Those events signalled yet another drastic downturn in the affairs of our city and country. The power that flows from the barrel of a gun had once more quenched the flickering hope that negotiation based on authentic concern for human rights reduce and ultimately resolve the violent conflicts of apartheid. The EPG mission was aborted, sanctions became the agenda of western and commonwealth nations, kragdadigheid took over, and within a month a countrywide state of emergency was declared. This has enabled the so-called national security management system to swing into full operation, with detentions, vigilante actions and severe restrictions on normal political activity and publishing piling up month by month.

2. Metropolitan Context

The Crossroads / KTC disaster needs also to be set more specifically in the Cape metropolitan context. Over the past decade this area has seen a succession of black ** squatter camp crises (as the recession reduced the need for black labour). There were demolitions at Modderdam and Werkgenot in 1977, Unibel 1978, Crossroads growth and resistance to harassment and demolition threats 1974 - 79, the April 1979 Koornhof reprieve and establishment of New Crossroads model township, the January 1983 KTC squatter explosion and March 1983 announcement of Khayelitsha - to include ultimate removal of all black residents of greater Cape Town ... The list seems endless.

Cape metropolitan transport planners estimate that the urban black population (for years an absurd de jure 110 000 approx) grew from 210 000 in 1980 to 563 000 in 1985. Their figures are no doubt also inaccurate but

* The opinions expressed in this working paper are those of the writer and are subject to correction. They are based on reading many documents including by J. Cole, C. Glover, T. Weaver, Legal Resources Centre, also D. Russell, also ten years of newspaper clippings (mainly English language press) and limited but very formative personal experiences. Also useful was the EPG report Mission to South Africa.

** Black here refers specifically to African (Xhosa speaking) people.

the general trend is indisputable: the black sector, so long disadvantaged by law and policy (coloured labour preference in Western Cape), has been and is growing at a stupendous and near-unstoppable rate. Within 25 years it will probably equal the so-called coloured population and thereafter become the largest sector (see statistics in "Cape 2000: a viable third world metropolis?" in Problems of Township Children and Youth, TLP report Black Sash Cape Western 1986).

Tens of thousands of ordinary black people struggling for family life, urban stability and full human rights have been buffeted by conflicting and divergent forces - the state, commerce and industry, liberatory movements (legal and illegal) and black opportunism. For survival "little people" have had to align themselves on short or longer term basis with one or other grouping, but alliances and divisions tend to be complex, dynamic and unstable as operative forces compete for the support or compliance of the masses. Since 1976 - 7 the long banned ANC and PAC seem to have been growing in strength, covertly engaged in political and guerilla activities, indirectly expressing themselves through legal charterist and black consciousness organisations. (The latter, by contrast with the Steve Biko era, take a hardline socialist position.)

3. Crossroads 1984 - 5

Whereas in the early years women exercised strong organised leadership in the struggle against removal, once major national and international support resources poured in the men took over and ousted or marginalised the women. By 1984 - 5 the eastern sector (Old Crossroads) was under the control of Johnson Ngxobongwana, who was also chairman of the (black) Western Cape Civic Association and therefore nominally a leader in the United Democratic Front. To the west there were several satellite camps, with their respective leaders (including Yamile, Toise, Siphika, Hoza).

In February 1985 rumours of forced removal led to pitched battles between state forces and Crossroads squatters, aided by township youth ("comrades"). Thereafter more devious methods were used to induce groups to move to Site C, Khayelitsha (18 month permits, financial assistance) where Hoza (of the former "Cathedral group") established himself as overall leader. Others, notably Nyanga Extension, Nyanga Bush and Portland Cement, proved resistant.

By April - May 1985 the metropolitan black mosaic included - Old Crossroads, New Crossroads (where United Womens Organisation UWO and Cape African Youth Congress CAYCO were militant), Khayelitsha houses and Site C squatters (approximately 35 000) and the existing townships where community organisations were flourishing (less so in Langa than in Nyanga and Guguletu). Although migrant labour had been much reduced, with hostels being converted into family housing, particularly in Langa, the Western Cape Hostel Dwellers Association was emerging as a welcome addition to the democratic "progressive" movement.

There were sharp tensions between Old and New Crossroads, particularly over monies collected for legal defence of people (mainly women) arrested in connection with rent protests and boycotts, and there was a rising spiral of communal violence. The countrywide unrest and state of emergency restrictions impacted sharply on the Western Cape, especially after October 1985, with boycotts, massive detentions of community and church leaders and internecine strife in the townships.

4. The May June 1986 Catastrophe

"Witdoek" (vigilante) attacks on New Crossroads in December 1985 and March 1986, yet in the space of a few weeks in May-June 1986 vigilantes (from Old Crossroads and Khayelitsha) were able to torch the homes of 30 000 people in Crossroads satellite camps and another 30 000 in KTC. (The actual events have been well documented; they will not be detailed here.) Clearly the balance of power had shifted. How? Why?

5. Legal Evidence of State Collusion

Affidavits collected by the Legal Resources Centre from residents, clergy, press photographers, senior journalists and medical doctors consistently allege active involvement by SA Police, and UCDs with SADF as accomplices. An LRC memorandum entitled "Crossroads, KTC and the Courts" details the events and legal actions taken during the mid-May to early August period, culminating in the ignominious withdrawal, minutes before the August 8 trial in the Cape Supreme Court was due to begin, of the Minister of Law and Order, the Police and other Respondents. This trial would have tested and assessed the allegations made against the State. In withdrawing the Respondents stated that they were not thereby admitting liability for the destruction of the four camps.

The residents were incensed and promptly instituted civil claims for compensation. Noting that "no class or representative action is possible under South African law" the UCT Institute of Criminology offered to assist LRC in collecting statements. With the aid of some fifty hastily trained volunteers (including about forty from the recently established Black Sash Townships Liaison Project) 3 300 statements were collected in three weeks, computerised and served on the Minister in letter form within the specified legal period. The amounts claimed total nearly R5 - million. A truly magnificent effort. Test cases are currently pending in the Cape Supreme Court and thought is being given to the plight of the majority of the 60 000 refugees whose claims could not be collected and processed in time.

6. Refugees and Relief

From day one, May 18 - 19, it was clear that relief operations on an unprecedented scale would be required. Welfare bodies, community and student organisations, churches and individuals rallied in a spontaneous ad hoc, partly coordinated response, initially to basic needs (food, blankets, shelter, health care). Churches and community centres became refugee settlements, plastic shelters blossomed in backyards and on open land in townships and once more in the (southern part of) KTC, and for a while people clung to the hope of being able to return to their homes.

However, as the months dragged by and the gap between relief resources and capabilities and refugee needs widened the trickle of refugees to Khayelitsha became a flood. Sites B and C in Khayelitsha probably now represent the largest and densest concentration of poverty, unemployment and sheer destitution in the Western Cape - despite the appearance of a flourishing informal sector and food gardens, and some provision of job creation payments (R20 p.w.) by Department of Manpower.

Meantime State of Emergency restrictions, detentions and harrassments (including the advent of the notorious "blue overalls / kitskonstabels") have brought progressive township organisation to a near standstill.

People are thereby deprived of self help resources and communal support networks at a time of intense and intensifying distress. Most people are now reduced to a desperate struggle for sheer physical survival: rent boycotts literally make the difference between eating and not eating.

KTC squatters are seeking upgrade of their area, with CPA office for Community Services (formerly UCDB) vying with Urban Foundation for consent and cooperation. The threat of forced removal has not disappeared: another large site and service area at Khayelitsha will shortly be ready for occupation, and it is clear that the national security management system and its local KTC are determined to bring all squatting into conformity with their patterns of controllability and containment.

The burnt area of Crossroads has been levelled and drained and is ready for development but official statements regarding next steps are ambiguous (the Urban Foundation pulled out soon after the conflagration and is reputedly non grata with the State.)

7. Solidarity

Support organisations and institutions in the wider community are also "licking their wounds". Welfare bodies, whose material and personnel resources are drained, are plagued with dependency attitudes and unrealistic expectations (sometimes raised by surveys of resident's needs and perceived priorities). Political solidarity groupings find it difficult to maintain contact and communication with organised black groupings, let alone develop consensus and strategy concerning how best to carry forward the people's struggle for acceptance and full participation in a nonracial and economically just city and country.

8. The Black Sash

The Black Sash shares this sense of dilemma. We have no answer, no blueprint. What we do have, apart from the usual resources of a white middle class organisation, are - the strength of the Advice Office history of involvement in black people's struggles against the pass-laws, the learnings of recent outreach to rural areas, experiences of black militancy and ubuntu (humanness) both in largescale events like funerals (now severely restricted) and on a smaller scale in monitoring trials of persons charged under security legislation, driving families to visit political prisoners in local and Boland jails, sharing social occasions with families of detainees (in Boland as well as locally) and visiting families and churches in townships and squatter areas.

All these renew our hope, courage and ability to go on "plodding the vision" of an open society in which the inevitable discomforts of third world material standards will be more than offset by the social, cultural and interpersonal enrichment made possible when godgiven human potentials are liberated and allowed to flourish. A luta continua.

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