

BLACK SASH NATIONAL CONFERENCE 1983 - CAPE TOWN

SQUATTERS AND HOUSING

Orlando East shack dwellers vowed they would defy the order by the Soweto Council to demolish their shacks. This act of defiance would render them liable to prosecution under the Squatters Act, in terms of which they could receive substantial fines. This too may avail them nought as their homes may still be demolished by the Council itself.

The residents refuse to demolish their shacks until the authorities have built homes for them and, as an expression of solidarity, plan to hold peaceful demonstrations at every place where shacks are demolished by the Council. This is an act of desperation by homeless people who have tried to provide themselves with a roof over their heads.

The Soweto Civic Association consulted lawyers to seek an interdict restraining the Council or WRAB from proceeding with the demolition plans. (Sowetan 2/2)

On February 2, WRAB sent an assortment of machines and men - WRAB police armed with guns, batons and machine gun rifles - into Orlando East to demolish the backyard tin shacks which had been declared illegal. The demolishers have a list of the numbers of the shacks destined for destruction and move from area to area.

The white official who supervised the raid told the shack occupants that their furniture would be kept at the Superintendent's office and they had 30 days in which to claim it - they would be expected to pay for transport and storage. (Star 2/2)

After the sudden action, several residents pulled down their shacks in order to protect their possessions. A number of people were held and taken to Orlando East WRAB; it is believed that they may be expelled to the homelands. (Sowetan 3/2)

Hundreds of Soweto shack dwellers stayed away from work on February 3 to watch over their belongings as their homes were pulled down. The stay-away decision was taken at an emotion-charged meeting attended by over 1,000 people which lasted until the early hours of the morning, at which speakers expressed their bitter anger at the destruction of their homes.

In commenting on the harsh action taken, Mr J J Oosthuizen, Housing Director for the Soweto Council, said the shocking conditions of more than 95% of the shacks compelled WRAB to tear down the tin structures. He said "the destruction of the shacks was being done in 'as humane a way as possible. We pulled out nails and placed them together; we packed the zinc, labelled it and carried the furniture nicely to our office'". The aim of the Council in pulling down the shacks was to eradicate the squatter problem and to encourage people to apply for loans to erect proper homes. The Council has R3½ million available for such a purpose. The shack problem was created by politicians who misled the residents. (Star and Sowetan, 3/2)

In September 1982, Mr Oosthuizen had said that in most cases shacks that had been mushrooming at the rate of 60 a week were erected without the knowledge or consent of the householders, and he warned that unless this stopped, Soweto would be turned into a slum within a year and would cause epidemics. He denied rumours that the Soweto Council had given permission for the shacks to be erected for use by close relatives. The regulations have not been changed. No structures were allowed to be built other than those approved by the Soweto Council. (Sowetan 13/9)

After the initial shock of disbelief, there are going to be a lot of people who will be furious at the draconian measures taken. The problem that will be created will not be destroyed as simply as the shacks. There must be thousands of "qualified" people living in these structures - what will happen to them now? The officials have said that most of the people who were evicted do not "qualify" to have been there. The authorities also claim that they gave the people adequate warning about their intentions. However, it is surely useless to tell a man who will have to sleep under the sky to leave his 'home'. He will stay under the roof in the hope that something will turn up. The authorities maintain that they consulted the various community councils - in the first place, the councils have no credibility in the townships, and in the second place, it is common belief that councillors will do what they are told as they are paid servants, most of whom jealously guard their positions. (Sowetan 3/2 editorial)

The Sofasonke Party, the oldest civic body in Soweto sent an urgent petition to Dr Piet Koornhof, Minister of Co-Operation and Development, to stop further demolitions, and claimed that these are bona fide residents who are entitled to accommodation which is not made available for them.

An 82 year old widow and two other women brought an urgent application to the Rand Supreme Court on February 3, to restrain the Soweto Council from demolishing shacks in Orlando East and to restore those already demolished. The matter was postponed during argument by Counsel for the Soweto Council that the Supreme Court had no jurisdiction in the matter because it involved the Soweto Council and black persons and should thus be heard in the Commissioners Court. After the postponement, Counsel for the Applicants and for the Respondent were to meet to agree on an undertaking to be made by the Soweto Council to stop demolishing shacks pending the judge's decision.

(Star and Sowetan 4/2)

It is possible that the Soweto Council is not entitled to proceed with the demolitions in terms of the Prevention of Illegal Squatters Act. An interim interdict was granted restraining the Soweto Council from demolishing the shack of one of the applicants. The shacks of the other two had already been demolished by the time the application was heard, (RDM 5/2)

32 Orlando East residents appeared before the Johannesburg Commissioners Court on charges under the Squatters Act - the matter was postponed to April 7. (Sowetan 4/2)

In another incident on February 2, armed police were called in to disperse more than 100 angry residents, singing freedom songs and with clenched fists, when they converged on the home of the local community councillor, demanding a place to sleep. (Sowetan 4/2)

The Soweto Council announced that the materials used to build the demolished shacks would not be returned to the owners. About 20 shacks have been torn down under the surveillance of armed police. Those who had gone to work returned to find their homes razed and their possessions removed. Some were left with only the clothes on their backs. One resident who has been there since 1932, the year after Orlando was built, said she was prepared to sleep in the open until she is provided with alternative accommodation. A disabled pensioner, mother of 12, said she had nowhere to go since WRAB police destroyed her home and she had no money to pay to redeem her furniture from the Superintendent's office. (RDM 4/2)

The President of the S A Council of Churches, the Reverend Peter Storey visited several points at which demolitions had taken place and on February 4 called on Mr Koornhof to stop the demolitions. Mr Storey said that in each case he had investigated, WRAB officials had been assisted by armed police and in at least two cases people had been /4

been assaulted. In some cases, money hidden in shacks had vanished and in still others the only money people had was in suitcases now in WRAB hands. He investigated the claim by WRAB that tenants were being exploited by being charged exorbitant rents and found this entirely unfounded and groundless. In fact, most of the shack tenants were family members and their contributions were essential to the economy of the household. (RDM 5/2)

The Deputy Chief Executive Officer of the Soweto Council said the interim interdict had no bearing on the demolition of the rest of the 4,000 shacks. (Star 7/2)

Residents vowed to thwart WRAB efforts to demolish shacks by applying for a court interdict for every one of the 4,000 shack dwellers. (Star 8/2)

Mr John Knoetze, Chairman of WRAB, told a luncheon of the SA-German Chamber of Trade and Industry in Johannesburg, that because Orlando had the smallest and oldest houses in Soweto, in consultation with the Soweto Community Council, WRAB was trying to get a "high rise" development going in that area and it is hoped that consortiums would be formed to build small blocks of flats, not more than three storeys. "But it will be entirely in their discretion - no one will be forced to build flats". On the "upgrading of the quality of life in Soweto", Mr Knoetze said that "people who did not want to demolish the little old houses in Orlando East must at least alter them drastically because they did not blend into the area the authorities would like to see develop there." He also said that freehold tenure for housing was not far off, but it would make home ownership more expensive. Community councils had already been given freehold tenure over the public places in their townships. (RDM 18/2)

It is now becoming an annual event for squatter shacks to be razed to the ground before the collective eye of Parliament and the world press. Not that the eye makes much difference to the unfortunates whose makeshift shelters have to go in the name of ideology. Thousands of blacks stream into the cities in search of work which is not available in the deeply depressed homelands. They are usually the offenders in erecting shacks, but this time blacks with permits to be in the city decided they could no longer take the incredible overcrowding, so erected shelters in the bush. In Cape Town, as Helen Suzman put it, "the same disgusting scene of police and destruction" was repeated again and again, until the shacks were gone. But the people are still there, although /5

although officials seem to think that ridding the land of shacks will make the people also disappear. In Parliament on February 18, the House discussed one of the most cynical motions when it thanked the Government for its positive planning and actions in the development of urban blacks outside the black states in South Africa. "To draw an analogy between this and thanking Hitler for what he did for the Jews may be a little harsh, but how absurd to thank people for what they are doing for urban blacks when they themselves admit they don't know what they are doing." (Star, 19/2 - Peter Sullivan, political correspondent)

"The people of Nyanga, Langa, Gugulethu, have been a sharp thorn in the flesh of our rulers for a long long time." The people of Orlando are now doing what has been replayed ad nauseam in Cape Town and what will inevitably happen at other times and in other places. People are driven into the white citis by hunger and lack of employment opportunities in the desperately depressed and poverty-riddled homelands. They are unable to find anywhere to live and are caught in the myriad and devious tentacles of apartheid. And so, with tremendous courage and hope, they erect a shack, they build a home, a small and humble abode in which they actually succeed in creating a life for themselves and their families. However, even this barest right is denied them, with the pitifully irrational excuse of slum clearance and combatting health hazards. There are shacks and slums in the sainted homelands too, but nobody cares about the disease and dangers there. So the shacks are destroyed. But what about the people who lived there? Wishful thinking cannot make the people disappear, nor can the repression by jackboot militarism, police dogs, batons, teargas cannisters and bullets. (Sowetan, February 21 - "On the Line")

TRANSVAAL REGION RESETTLEMENT COMMITTEE

March 1983

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MORE ABOUT SOWETO

In November 1982, when the Sowetan covered the threat of the removal of the shack dwellers in Orlando East, it found, inter alia, eight families living in a scrap van for which they paid R45,00 per month each.

More than 50 families are living in derelict cars and vans on the outskirts of Soweto - some of them for more than four years. "We had nowhere to go so we looked around over the open veld, where we could erect shacks for our families." There are as many as seven people living in some vans. Some of the women said they were prepared to face any kind of harassment rather than go back to the homelands without their husbands.

The future of the ten families squatting at the "Chicken Farm" in Kliptown is bleak, as their landlord Mr Philip Thompson has threatened to demolish their shacks. The strand families, most of whom are "legal" squatters on the housing waiting list for many years, believe WRAB is urging to have them evicted, as the threat of removal came four days after WRAB policemen conducted a pass raid. Mr Thompson admitted that he was under pressure from WRAB to evict all the black people who had been on his land for many years. He felt pity for them but could not see what he could do. Local anti-evictions campaigners accuse WRAB of using landlords as scapegoats - they want to solve the squatter problem without having to find alternative accommodation for them.

EAST RAND

The East Rand Administration Board has demolished 1,000 shacks in Katlehong and Thokoza near Germiston since November last year. The central feature is the growing number of shacks, now between 34,000 and 44,000, which means there is an average of two to three shacks, and sometimes as many as 16, in a back yard. As a result, facilities have ground to a standstill - sewerage system (since October, and in some cases even June, of last year); most areas don't have water, and if they do it is weak and inconsistent. In 1980, there were 8,000 shacks, most of them belonging to people on waiting lists for housing, entitled to reside permanently in the area. One worker said "management has left the responsibility for our housing to the government. The government has failed. We must now fight for houses as part of our struggle on the shop floor." (Wits Student, Vol 35 No 21)