

REMOVALS CONTINUE: THE CASE OF THE BRITS OLD LOCATION ('OUKASIE') REMOVAL:

On the 17 October, 1986 the residents of Oukasie woke up to discover that their township, legally, no longer existed. The government gazette of that states that Mr Chris Heunis had in terms of section 37 (2) of the Black Communities Development Act disestablished Oukasie and that the land it occupied "is no longer defined and set apart as town".

In about 100 words the minister had set in motion a process which if carried through will mean the first officially sanctioned and legislated forced removal since the nightmare of Mogopa in February 1984.

The Minister released a Press statement that the residents of Oukasie "would be resettled at the Development Trust town of Lethlabile about 20 km from Brits".

He went on to say that "the move followed several years of negotiations with the former community council of the township after it had been decided that the poor hygienic conditions there and the astronomic costs involved in upgrading the town did not make its continued use a viable proposition". The process and legitimation of the disestablishment have to be carefully examined.

In February 1985 the Minister of Co-operation and Development, Gerrit Viljoen, announced that all forced removals were to be suspended. The case of Oukasie illustrates very clearly that the South African government has not renounced this policy but is merely pursuing it in a more sophisticated way.

A SKETCH OF OUKASIE

The government has not built a 'house' in Oukasie since it was established in the 1930's. The few tin shacks built by the government and that masquerade as state housing are rented and serviced for R24 a month. The only services are refuse and night-soil removal. The township has a bucket latrine system. It has, totally inadequate drainage system, no tarred roads, no electricity and no street lighting. The community gets its water from 54 taps placed across the township.

The large majority of Oukasie residents live in privately built houses. The plot-holders have built houses not only to accommodate their own families but also the many township residents who do not have their own homes. The plot-holders own the houses but there is no freehold. There are approximately 1 000 plot-holders in the township.

The plots are generally crowded and on a couple of the larger stands there are up to 20 families. On average there are 3 families per stand. This over-crowding is due to the government's refusal to build more houses or allow people to occupy land outside of the very small area proclaimed for African occupation. Despite the availability of adjoining farm land, the government has refused to allocate more land for expansion.

The township's condition clearly reveals a deliberate policy of government neglect. Through the years it has severely limited the amount of money allocated to Oukasie and in this way has deliberately allowed the township to decline.

However, in spite of this, Oukasie, with a population of 15 000 people (now down to approximately 10 000) has the vitality characteristic of a small, densely populated village. Most people living in Oukasie were born there and there is clearly a feeling of belonging.

Since most employed residents work in nearby factories they share a common work experience. Also strong neighbourhood support networks have built up over the years helping residents to survive the effects of recession and acute unemployment.

The township is very different to those built by the government. Housing design and street layout vary considerably. There are a number of solidly built and attractive houses. An unusual feature of the township is the abundance of trees. The community recently made several parks. They symbolise resistance to removal to Lethlabile. One is called 'Survival Park' another 'We will not move'.

Most of the people are employed in one of the approximately 40 factories in the area. Examples are Firestone, Afrox, Lumex, Cliff's Engineering, African Telegraph Cables (ATC), and Bosch. Many of these companies are multinationals or have strong financial and technical ties with multinationals. There is a history of strong trade union organisation and struggle in Brits. Most of the members of the Brits Action Committee (BAC), formed to fight the removals, are actively involved in or have had experience of trade union organisation.

A big advantage of the township is that it is only 4 kilometres from the industrial area of Brits. Many of the residents are thus within walking distance of their work-place. Unemployment in Oukasie is very high. The recession (or the desire of some employers to move away from a unionised work force) has led to the closure of one of the two Steelbrite factories in the area with the loss of 850 jobs; the Alfa Romeo factory with the loss of approximately 1 200 jobs, and the Putco bus building section with the loss of 400 jobs. If people are moved to Lethlabile, a further 20 kilometres away from the industrial area, unemployed workers are going to find it even more difficult to find jobs. The transport costs of employed workers will increase considerably.

LETHLABILE

Government spokesmen say that Lethlabile is a model township. This is highly questionable. Besides the 175 built houses, for sale at R4 000, Lethlabile looks like any other resettlement camp. Most people live in the most appalling conditions. Those families that have not been able to purchase one of the 175 houses, are allocated a tin structure measuring approximately nine square metres. They are then expected to build a house on the allocated site within two years.

It is predictable that due to the excessively high rate of unemployment in the area most of these families will never be able to afford to build a proper house and Lethlabile will become a worse slum than Oukasie. Lethlabile's only advantage over Oukasie is that each plot is supplied with a tap and a flush toilet. The crucial question is that why in 55 years the government has not built similar facilities in the old township. A very strange feature of Lethlabile is its cemetery. It must be one of the few cemeteries where the graves have been dug prior to their occupants becoming available. There are about 500 open graves- most of them are water-logged.

Possibly the most negative thing about Lethlabile is where it is. It is situated 24 kilometres from Brits and borders Bophuthatswana. Although the government has promised not to incorporate Lethlabile into Bophuthatswana, its location makes the likelihood of incorporation strong. The residents of Lethlabile would then have to endure the intensely repressive, union bashing administration of Bophuthatswana. They would also face the possibility of losing their South African citizenship. The government has, in the past, broken its word on the issue of incorporation, the latest example being the cases of the townships, Ekangala and Vleifontein. The residents of Ekangala and Vleifontein were told they would not be incorporated into any bantustan.

Subsequently, Vleifontein was incorporated into Venda and Ekangala is to become part of KwaNdebele.

THE PROCESS OF REMOVAL.

No consultation

The decision to remove the township has been brewing for some time. The Brits city council first mooted the removal in the 1960's.

In 1970 400 families were moved to Mothutlung 15 kilometres south of Brits.

The Nationalist party MP for Brits, Dr Jan Grobler, was quoted as saying that he had been 'involved in negotiations over the fate of the township since he became an MP in 1977'. He went on to say that the community has been consulted and that 'the local community council on behalf of the community, requested that the move begin as soon as possible'. (Financial Mail, 28 February 1986). Mr Heunis in his press release announcing the disestablishment also asserted that the community had been consulted. It is untrue that the residents of Oukasie were adequately consulted. The community was not consulted and was given no opportunity to discuss the issue. The residents were first told about the impending removal at the beginning of December 1985 at a meeting called by the community council. The community councilors, all whom presently live in Lethlabile, were elected by a small proportion of the Oukasie residents. There had been no public announcement of the removal prior to that meeting.

After the announcement that Oukasie was to be moved was made, things moved very swiftly. By June 1986 approximately 800 sites had been allocated and about 5 000 people had moved to Lethlabile from Oukasie. This does not mean that Mr Heunis's and Dr Jan Grobler's assertion that the majority of Oukasie residents want to move to Lethlabile, or that those who have moved have done so voluntarily, is correct. A range of incentives and pressures are being used to strongly encourage people to move. At present the movement from Oukasie to Lethlabile is virtually nil.

Freezing an empty stands for occupation

An important pressure was that once a plot-holder had agreed to move, generally by being offered a large lump sum in compensation, all the dwellings on his/her plot were demolished regardless of the condition they may be in, and all the tenants had to move out. The site was then frozen for any future development or occupation. Thus many of the people who moved are ex-tenants of plot-holders who opted to go to Lethlabile. The lack of alternative accommodation forced the ex-tenants out. Since January 1986 residents who requested empty Development Board houses or stands have been turned down. Instead the Development Board's policy was to tear down houses as soon as they became vacant. When a Brits Action Committee member went to apply for a vacant stand or house he was told to tell his lawyer to shove the application he had drafted up his a.... . In early April the Development Board's policy was successfully challenged in court. The judge ruled that all demolition was to be stopped and that the first house that became vacant was to be allocated to the resident who took the Board to court.

This judgement was subsequently totally undermined by the disestablishment of Oukasie. Residents can no longer apply for houses or sites as legally the township no longer exists.

Oukasie neglect, Lethlabile incentives

As indicated earlier, the government, by deliberately neglecting the township and building superior services in Lethlabile, has certainly strongly encouraged people to move. There is no doubt that many people in Oukasie live in very poor conditions due to the government's refusal to upgrade or extend the township. For some people Lethlabile offers a possible escape from these conditions.

The government supplies free buses for people to go and view Lethlabile and pays for all removal costs. It has been alleged that businessmen were promised loans to establish new stores if they moved. Also business and taxi licenses appear to be easier to obtain if a person is resident in Lethlabile.

Discrimination against work-seekers from Oukasië

In the Brits area the local Development Board acts as an employment agency. Work-seekers come to the Board offices in the hope that a job will come up. There have been numerous allegations that when jobs become available the Development Board official concerned overlooks Oukasië residents on almost every occasion and gives preference to Lethlabile residents.

Forcing Oukasië to bury their dead in Lethlabile

For the last 6 years residents of the old Brits township have been forced by the government to bury their dead in Lethlabile. This is despite the fact that there is land available for extending the Oukasië's cemetery. After a great deal of pressure the local administration recently gave permission for a person to be buried in Oukasië. They are now saying that the African part of the cemetery is full and that the remaining land is for coloured use only.

Repression and violence

A very important factor which hastened the movement of people from Oukasië was the emergence of vigilantes. Petrol bombings, a grenade attack and murderous bomb attack on the leaders of the anti-removal struggle combined with an almost constant police presence in what was previously a very peaceful township severely dampened the determination of a sizeable part of the population to stay. In the early morning of 7 March 1986, the houses of the chairperson of the Brits Action Committee (BAC), Marshall Buys, and the president of the Young Christian Workers, Jacob Mohatshe, were petrol-bombed. Shots were fired at residents when they tried to pursue the attackers. Nobody was hurt in these two attacks, though two rooms in Mr Buys' house were badly burnt.

A public meeting held at the Roman Catholic Church Hall that evening to discuss the petrol-bombing was teargassed. Many people were badly cut by glass as they desperately tried to escape from the packed hall. The teargassing occurred immediately after a speaker requested that the soldiers crawling towards the hall go home as they were not protecting the people. On Saturday morning, 8 March, the chairperson of the (BAC) was arrested and initially charged with arson. The charges were subsequently withdrawn. He was released on Tuesday, 11 March.

In the early hours of Tuesday morning, the house of the secretary of the (BAC), Mr Sello Ramakobye, was petrol-bombed. Mr Ramakobye is also the chairperson of the Firestone shop stewards council. Immediately afterwards the home of the parents of a leading activist, Mr Leonard Brown, was hand-grenaded. Residents were fired on when they tried to pursue the attackers. At this stage nobody has been arrested in connection with the incidents. Mr Brown was detained on 15 April, 1986 and was charged with attempted murder and intimidation. He was subsequently acquitted.

Tuesday, 27 May, was a tragic day in the history of the Oukasië struggle. A lethal home-made bomb was thrown into the house of MAWU organiser, Mr David Modimoeng. Mr Modimoeng's wife, Joyce was killed as the house was ripped apart. Miraculously, Mr Modimoeng and his children were not badly hurt. Mr Modimoeng although he is not a member of the BAC worked closely with the committee in fighting the removal. The death of Mrs Modimoeng sent shock-waves through the community and the progressive trade union movement. Her death was the first fatality of the Oukasië struggle.

A successful national stay-away at all MAWU controlled factories was called on the day of the funeral. MAWU also initiated a consumer boycott in the Brits area. The Witwatersrand region of the Congress of South African Trade Unions issued a statement condemning the bombing: 'The attack is an act of the reactionary section of our country who do not accept that the workers have a say in South Africa. Workers will now have to think of ways of defending themselves from these attacks'.

WHY IS THE GOVERNMENT SO KEEN TO MOVE OUKASIE?

The government has once again used its age-old reason for removals; the township is a slum, is unhygienic and the costs of upgrading are astronomical. The residents dispute this for various reasons. First, they argue that the lack of services in the township is obviously due to deliberate neglect. The community asks why in 55 years the government has not supplied the most basic services. This question has become even more pertinent with the recent development of the neighbouring white suburb, Elandsrand, which has all the necessary infrastructure.

The contention that the costs of developing Oukasie will be astronomical is vigorously disputed by the residents. They find it difficult to believe that it can be cheaper to develop a township from scratch and argue that the money that has been spent on developing Lethlabile should have been spent on developing Oukasie. The feeling of the residents have been vindicated by an upgrading feasibility study by highly qualified engineers commissioned by the BAC and the local branches of the Metal and Allied Workers' Union (MAWU) and National Automobile and Allied Workers' Union (NAAWU).

The study concludes that for about R3 million the township can be substantially upgraded. One had to question how Mr Heunis reached the conclusion that the costs of upgrading will be "astronomical. He has refused to make public the government report on this issue. It is clear that the official reasons for the disestablishment, have to be treated with a great deal of scepticism. The minister made his decision although he knew that an independent upgrading feasibility study had been commissioned. He has refused even to consider the results of the study.

It appears that the reason for the disestablishment is that the township is too close to the white group area. The disestablishment is a desperate attempt by the government to appease the ultra-right and retain this very marginal seat. Brits' white residents are a conservative electorate. In the 1981 election the ultra-right wing HNP obtained 3 517 votes and the Nationalist Party obtained 5 362 votes, a majority of only 1 845. It is no wonder that the local National Party MP, Dr Jan Grobler, declared that the disestablishment represents a highpoint in his career as an MP. The black residents of Brits are being required to pay the price of the government's attempts to retain a white parliamentary seat.

Another possible reason for the removal could be the government's and the employers' determination to smash the strong trade union movement that has emerged in the Brits area. Both MAWU and NAAWU have a strong presence in Brits. MAWU has approximately 3 000 members organised in 12 factories. NAAWU also has a strong presence with approximately 800 workers. Incorporating Lethlabile into Bophuthatswana would help to weaken the very strong trade union movement that has developed in the Brits area. The Bophuthatswana administration's record makes it very likely that active trade unionists living in Lethlabile will be severely harassed if Lethlabile is incorporated.

HOW THE STRUGGLE IS BEING WAGED?

Community Mobilization

The community has been mobilised against the removal. This was dramatically illustrated on Saturday, 22 November, when in a period of 5 hours more than 2 000 adult residents each signed in affidavit that he/she was not consulted and did not want to move from Oukasie. From early December 1985 regular and well-attended public meetings have been called by the BAC. These meetings have resolved to fight the removals to the bitter end.

The actions of the trade unions

The BAC through the trade unions, has put pressure on the large employers in the area to challenge the removal. Firestone has already been challenged as to why it donated \$15 000 for the building of a creche in Lethabile. Firestone has reversed this decision.

Towards the end of March 1986, MAWU, NAAWU, the BAC and TRAC met with the management of organised factories in the area and with the Federated Chamber of Industries (FCI) and the Steel, Engineering, Iron Federation of South Africa (SEIFSA). The employer organisations and managements were asked to put pressure on the government to drop its decision to remove Oukasie. The FCI and SEIFSA have subsequently been in contact with the government on the removal issue. A further meeting with the employers was held at the end of April. At this meeting employers were called upon to make a public statement voicing their objection to any forced removal of Oukasie residents and to any intention to deproclaim the township. The FCI and SEIFSA agreed to this and also committed themselves to help finance the upgrading of the township.

The second meeting with employers had some results. Dr Grobler, the local Nationalist MP, agreed to meet with the BAC. At this historic meeting he agreed that nobody would be forced to move from Oukasie. However, he refused to give any guarantee that the township would not be disestablished. Later events clearly illustrate why he was so unwilling. International worker organisations have also been drawn into the struggle. The international Metalworkers Federation sent a telex to P.W. Botha condemning the government's attempts to remove Oukasie. After the disestablishment was announced the employer federations were asked to set up a meeting with Heunis. Heunis refused to see a delegation from Oukasie but in early November a meeting was held with Mr de Beer, the director-general of the Department of Constitutional Development and Planning.

The Oukasie delegation told de Beer to relay to his minister that the residents do not want to move and that the report that the community commissioned illustrated that township was upgradable. De Beer refused to accept the report. There has been no further communication from the department.

The legal strategy

The decision to disestablish the township will, if all else fails, be challenged in court.

A FINAL NOTE

The disestablishment represents a dramatic reversal of declared Government policy. If the removal of Oukasie goes ahead it will be another tragic chapter in the history of apartheid. It will dramatically illustrate that the government is intent on pursuing its own parochial interests whatever the cost. It will again show that when communities try to enter into negotiations with the government they are contemptuously brushed aside. It will reinforce the contention that the government's talk of reform is a complete sham. It is clear that not only for the sake of the residents of Oukasie but for all South Africa's inhabitants this removal must be stopped and Oukasie rerieved.