

DETENTIONS IN AND AROUND GRAHAMSTOWN (12 JUNE 1986 - 31 JANUARY 1988)

Paper to be presented to the National Conference of the Black Sash, March 1988
by Members of the Albany Black Sash.

This report is based on the closely related working records of Albany Black Sash and Grahamstown Dependants' Conference. Since the declaration of the State of Emergency on 12 June 1986, we have systematised our detention data in more detail, enabling us to read certain trends with some confidence. Our area covers Alicedale, Alexandria, Port Alfred, Grahamstown, Fort Beaufort, Adelaide, Bedford and Somerset East.

Detention has been used far more widely in the Eastern Cape than in any other part of the country except the PWV triange, as the DPSC reports show.¹ Analysis of our data suggests that the underlying purpose is destabilisation. Detention is one of many methods used by the State to crush people's power by direct control. Others in the Emergency strategy are: the closing of the legal space for organisations to operate by the banning of meetings; the crushing of resistance through the extended powers granted to police and army; the imposition of the municipal police in the townships; covert state support for vigilante and death squad activity; control of information and disinformation from the Bureau of Information to isolate and confuse communities.

The repressive strategy in which detention takes part also extends to co-optation, where appropriate: the recruitment of municipal police from the ranks of the politically sensitized youth through the lure of a steady wage, for example. Sash members have also seen the effects of state-imposed 'upgrade' initiatives, a top-down strategy which effectively removes planning and decision-making from the community.

It is highly risky, therefore, to assume that the number of detainees from a particular area is a gauge of local organisational activity. So many other forms of repression are used, it is more meaningful to ask how

appropriate the State's use of detention is. On the whole, it seems to us that detention is very intelligently employed.

In Port Alfred, for example, the State did not need to rely on detention to destabilise organisation. Instead it used a sustained barrage of combined tactics: the lengthy occupation of the community centre by the army; arson attacks on leaders' houses; pressure on the white business sector to withdraw their support from negotiations with the township; the recruitment of large numbers of municipal police (33); the clampdown on meetings.

This combination of tactics was deployed precisely because Port Alfred had become such a threat. The innovative approaches to local government which the black community and white commerce and industry were hammering out together were receiving accolades from all around the country and even some interest overseas. Highly developed sector-based organisation, solid regional and national links and massive group solidarity (as evidenced by the success of the series of schools and consumer boycotts, work stayaways and community programmes including the cemetery cleanup) saw Port Alfred acclaimed as a model of community organisation.

Alexandria, by contrast, was a readier target for straightforward deployment of detention. Smaller, more exposed and thus easier to monitor, isolated from the influential white business sectors, less known to the public and media than Port Alfred, wave upon wave of residents could quietly be removed. Of the towns monitored, Alexandria has by far the highest detention rate at 8% of the black population.² Alexandria has been one of the great UDF centres of our area. Detention has been putting up the personal price of UDF membership, and this design has indeed succeeded in spreading some apathy and resentment towards the UDF affiliates, seen to have brought such trouble to the community.

As in Port Alfred, a small handful of loosely grouped activists battle to find issues around which the community can be successfully mobilised without alerting too much interest from the security police. They have to contend with the fact that the State monitors all activities and promptly intervenes when a community that has been stopped gets going again. (Part

of local skill lies now in gauging when to disappear.)

Sometimes harassment is preferred to detention as a first reaction, showing how precisely the State's actions are sometimes calculated. An object of its attack is the Rev. Dan Nkomo, a Methodist minister in Alexandria. Mr. Nkomo has become a main centre of support in the community, in the absence of leaders. Since October 87 he has been harassed continually by right-wing forces: his house was bombed, he has had several death and kidnapping threats.³ Detention has its drawbacks for the State here: it would turn him into a martyr and mobilise the church in and beyond South Africa, whereas terrorism might force the church to transfer him out of the area. The merits here are that another agency would be removing him permanently from the community.

Planning is not always as sophisticated as this. At times it is clear that one official hand does not know what the other is doing. Personal scores are also settled. Yet to some extent, arbitrariness is also strategic in detentions. Beyond the leadership, the first target, it does not matter who the local force detains. In fact, where detention is used to unnerve a community, the more arbitrary the better. Random detention has tended to be used in every town, to judge from some extensive debriefing: many ex-detainees felt their detention was random, particularly as they were never questioned or given any reason for their arrest.

Here we should make the obvious point that detention is intended to destabilise not only at community level but at the level of the individual. The high length of detentions, and the emphasis on young adults, are evident in the two tables attached to this paper.

The State has been using the detention system to break people. Detention shakes family economies and relationships. Its long isolation in dull and very repressive conditions tends to weaken a person mentally, emotionally and physically. The odd incident declares this intention in so many words, as when the security police in Grahamstown warned a local leader recently: 'We have locked you up for a year and it hasn't worked - next time we will just beat you up.'⁴

The long-term results of detention still lie in the future, and may be more complex than appears now, but undeniably people and organisations have been damaged. The MASA (Medical Association of South Africa) Report of 1983 states that the situation of detention presents potential hazards to the mental and physical health of detainees. Detainees' defence against mental breakdown is removed as a result of the imposition of a state of helplessness, involving sensory and perceptual deprivation and social isolation. Various psychological methods involved in the coercion of detainees have also been declared as torture. According to guidelines concerning torture issued by the World Medical Association at Tokyo in 1975 (the 'Tokyo Declaration'), solitary confinement is one such method. There is also no doubt that the rapid organisation of street committees in 1986, for example, was simply stopped in its tracks by detention.

Detentions seem to be on the wane at present, as seen in Table 3. The patterns of arrests has been roughly thus: detentions peaked at the start of the State of Emergency in June/August 1986,⁵ with a slower intake in September/November 1986. Table 4 shows that from September 1986, releases slowly started to counterbalance the new arrests through to April/May 1987. A lull in arrests then lowered the overall figure.

On 11 June 1987, the last day of the Emergency year, a mass release of 60 detainees gave hope that many more would come out but this did not happen. Instead, the detainee population dropped only very slightly to September. By the end of November some more releases reduced our recorded figure to 158 detainees still inside. The present total inside is 118, as far as we know (31 January 1988). It is estimated that altogether 1200 plus people have been detained from our monitored region.

While the top leadership has not been released, it would appear that there has been a recent decision to start releasing second level and local leadership. Some of these leaders were released via Alicedale police station where they spent their last week or two and were given warning lectures by the police about the danger to themselves if they returned to take up community affairs again. They were told they would be watched.⁶ Detention still awaits them - they are out of the cell, but only as far as the exercise yard. The ominous threat that assault might be used instead

of redetention cannot be ignored either. The heavy air of caution and the threats to ex-detainees suggest that the State might not be as confident about its level of control as appears from the releases, which in turn may mean that other factors have forced these releases. At this stage we do not know what lies behind the decision.

As we have indicated, detentions are no longer routine, but are used as a strategy to suppress the emergence of any perceived new organisation - for example, some members of the newly established union of Rhodes University workers were arrested recently and are still detained.

The very fact that people must cope with detention means that a vast amount of individual and community energy is deflected from other constructive work. (This also certainly features in the State's calculations.) But supporting detainees and their families, and then working to counteract the ill effects of their detention, are basic tasks which can help reorganisation too. Inevitably any activity is low-key, but at this stage it is the continuity and potential for organisation that matters.

The main support for detainees and their families involves the families themselves, friends, and resource groups based outside the townships: Legal Resources Centre and other law firms, Dependants' Conference, Sash and the PE Crisis Information Centre. These individuals and organisations have been drawing closer together to organise visits, pocket money, clothing, study material and some legal backup for detainees (although the fact that detainees have hardly any rights deprives them of the scope to claim and demand). Family grants are also a major item.

One recent Sash project was to send in food parcels and cards to the detainees at Christmas. The State withheld permission for the parcels, and the cards were posted but not necessarily received. This obstruction by the State shows once again that no 'law and order' is at stake, only a campaign to keep morale from rising in terms outside the State's own co-option plan. The miseries of detention are part of that war.

Support for ex-detainees is also vital. People vary in their resilience, of course - personality counts a great deal; so does prison experience

(both in what is done to people, e.g. solitary confinement, and in the quality of detainee interaction). But a great deal depends on how much strain they and their families can be spared, and on local attitudes to them. It is harder for people to recover where their family is coping with massive economic and personal strain. Some ex-detainees seem to have kept a high morale despite high ill-effects because they returned to a very supportive community. Somerset East was a clear example here. Released detainees from Somerset East said that they had changed but people were still pulling together.

The most formal way of pinpointing problem areas after detainees are released has been through debriefing by Sash (178 ex-detainees were debriefed between July and November 1987. Two immediate forms of follow-up are medical and psychological examinations and treatment.

The shortage of committed doctors in Grahamstown has made it extremely difficult to provide adequate medical services to ex-detainees in and around the town, from places such as Alicedale, Bedford and Adelaide. In August 87 Sash organised a workshop for doctors, psychologists, social workers and nurses. Every single doctor in Grahamstown was invited, but not one attended. The only doctors present were from NAMDA in PE and East London. Arrangements were then made for ex-detainees to be examined in PE by a NAMDA team. This proved a very awkward arrangement. As an alternative a local doctor who was working part-time was approached. She agreed to examine patients twice a week, for which NAMDA paid her an honorarium, and the arrangement continued for three months to December. During this period 170 ex-detainees were examined.

It was however very difficult to provide long-term treatment to people from the smaller towns such as Fort Beaufort. Grahamstown people could safely be referred to Settlers' Hospital, but referral in the smaller towns was a problem because the general attitude to detainees was extremely hostile. With only one doctor doing the first examinations, it was impossible to check all the ex-detainees. At present DC are paying doctors on a single consultation basis. This arrangement is unsatisfactory and will in no way ensure that everyone gets medical treatment. The organisation of medical facilities therefore remains an area to which much attention needs to be

given. At present the best that can be done is to ensure that the more obvious troubles - diabetes, ear and eye problems, backache, chest and stomach complications - are seen to.

Medical checkups have been a major concern not only because prison life is debilitating but because prison clinics are notorious for cursory examinations and treatment among the detainees.

The whole region also relies on Grahamstown for psychological help. The Psychology Clinic at Rhodes University and the outpatients staff at Fort England mental hospital have been very helpful. A couple of people from detention have been found to be nearly suicidal. The others have had a range of symptoms within the spectrum of post-traumatic stress disorder, notably loss of memory and concentration, emotional instability and various forms of depression.

People definitely can get better but there are difficulties: lack of a job, income and occupation (often the lot of the ex-detainee) creates tension and depression in itself. Re-entering the outside world after perhaps a year away under grossly unnatural conditions takes a great deal of inner adjustment to achieve, and people who do not understand this can become horrified at how they don't seem to fit in again, and also guilty at what they see as a personal failure as democrat, lover, friend, father and so on.

Two diagnostic problems (apart from the fact that people outside Grahamstown do not seem to have local professionals they can trust) are that lay people do not seem to be able to spot mental symptoms as readily as physical ones; and the after-effects of detention may only manifest themselves after a long time, even three years after release, we are told. With community education on the subject, though, there is potential for very good remedial work simply by the right kind of understanding and support.

The need for continued education among detainees and ex-detainees started a new study programme last year. EWE, as it is called, is run by DC and SACHED in Grahamstown for two main purposes: to fund study courses for

people in or out of jail whose academic year was disrupted by detention, and to give academic support to ex-detainees. EWE students at home form a co-op which shares information and planning through regular regional meetings every one or two months. At the local level study groups have been formed, families apply for detainees needing correspondence courses, books and magazines are distributed, and now mini-libraries are being set up. EWE Centre handles the orders, starts the deliveries and distribution of material, negotiates with the prisons, security police, DET, etc., as required by the group. For example, in 1987 EWE needed to request DET to extend the deadline for Std 10 examination registration and to publish the 1988 prescribed booklist three months ahead of schedule (DET did both).

EWE exists in all the towns under review, plus Cradock. Despite EWE's best efforts to stay low-profile, some members have been harassed, and the SACHED building was burnt out on 4 January 1988, which has been thought to be occasioned quite largely because it represented a growing centre for very lively participation in a structure stretching across the region. Warned by some earlier harassment, EWE had removed their files over the holiday period and so all the records are still intact. The books for the mini-libraries - not to mention SACHED's own library worth R100 000 - were lost, but strong support is enabling EWE to replace their stocks. EWE is now re-establishing their centre in SACHED's new 18-room building - which means that they have actually expanded as the result of this attack.

EWE members know that in this project as in any other brand of organisation they are living more or less dangerously. There is great conviction about the scheme, though. It answers a real need, at least a present.

EWE also has some hidden benefits. The study groups help with the awkward transition from jail back into open society. They give people direction which is all the more important when there is not very much going on for people to develop their purposes around. Studying in itself is a sort of mental exercise which helps ex-detainees regain their memories, concentration and general stability. People gain in confidence through the role they have in helping others in turn, whether by teaching them (Each One Teach One is very much the motto) or by just helping to start others off when they also emerge from jail. Ex-detainees are perhaps the best

helpers in the business, having been through it all themselves. Finally, because the study groups and their resources are not exclusive to ex-detainees, EWE is also developing a group interest that we hope will not be divisive. It is important to blur the distinction between those who have been detained and those who have not, otherwise ex-detainees can form an exclusive group (which might also be a favoured one financially through funding efforts from outside).

The other main overt scheme in the region is production co-ops. They are a direct response to the lack of jobs in the rural Eastern Cape, a fact of life which is exacerbated for ex-detainees who are almost all blacklisted where they had had a chance of employment before. Nearly all those who were employed before their detention have lost their jobs. The only people who were paid normally while in detention were those employed by Rhodes University and (surprisingly) the DET. Those ex-detainees have returned to work. The only others who regained their jobs were a few employees of local municipalities. Private firms, particularly in the smaller towns, have been extremely hostile and unwilling to re-employ people from detention. One firm in Port Alfred said it was their policy not to employ politicals. Another ex-detainee from Fort Beaufort was told, "You are a terrorist and we do not employ such people". Others were informed that their jobs had been filled and there were no vacancies at present.

The loss of income to the family of these ex-detainees has been considerable. None received any notice pay in detention, and all who had been in detention for nine months or longer had forfeited their UIF benefits. The halo effect of detention means that their chances of once again becoming a breadwinner have dropped significantly. People in this position have expressed the view that this is one of the main reasons for their continued depression.

Not surprisingly, then, the setting up of co-ops to generate and circulate income is being seriously considered as an alternative by all the communities in the area. Only Alexandria has got one going so far, but indications are that co-ops will be a major focus for 1988.

Community revival is bound to take new forms. We do not expect to see

detentions ending or overt mass organisations developing to any size while the present government lasts. Obviously co-optation will be the preferred State strategy; and the community will have to learn covert ways of organisation and resistance to State moves. About the only good aspect of detention was that it brought hundreds of people together for months on end from all over the region at a time when not even 10 people in one township could meet together. It has given leadership a lot of conference time for such planning.

What can we say to the State? Detention is an outrage, like many other practices now. We know that the State will ignore any point of principle because detention is a war strategy in a struggle for power - to argue about the denial of basic rights is like warning the SADF that bullets kill.

But we do believe that all support, resource and civic groups should pressurise government and other sectors on a related point: that if detention is not formally imposed on people as a punitive measure, the onus should be on the State to redress the damage done by detention where the departments can do so. Rent should be waived where breadwinners are detained. Schools should be geared to special intakes and remedial work; medical services to adequate care and aftercare. Job creation schemes should be created on a long-term basis not merely as relief work. This is not to prettify detention or give it any credibility, but to claim these most basic forms of recompense simply as a matter of equity.

State institutions should also pressurise the private sector to re-employ people who have been detained. Up to now, the only official encouragement has been in the wrong direction, as we have heard it - where police have visited employers to deter them from taking ex-detainees back.

UIF should be paid from the day of release. Pension payments should be resumed without delay.

Employment agencies such as the Federated Chamber of Industries and Assacom should be pressed into a policy of enforcing their members to re-employ ex-detainees. We strongly support the strategy of unions to enforce payment

of wages throughout detention.

Resource agencies who may be approached for co-op funding will need to co-ordinate internally. They must also be prepared to offer not only funds but administrative, accounting and marketing skills.

The medical profession needs a basic political education. This is a long-term task. Meanwhile, regional personnel need to be shared as constructively as possible, and to continue with workshop education to lay people. Mobile clinics serving outlying towns would be a very helpful contribution if NAMDA could manage it.

Street Law (paralegal skills) is in its infancy but may develop as a lay support to the progressive lawyers available.

Professional psychological services should be made as pervasive as possible, and their monitoring capacity extended so that they not only receive clients but look out for them. The modest but real therapeutic effect of the study programme suggest to us that psychologists should be drawn into co-op planning.

Existing organisations with reasonable security - churches and other bodies - would be valuable as accommodating agencies for local projects. They have a measure of protection to offer, plus sometimes material facilities such as a workplace or a phone.

To sum up, the State's use of detention as a destabiliser and repressive tactic seems evident. It is one of many weapons in the Emergency armoury. Community support for those detained takes a lot of local energy but can be a basis for reorganisation. Some local projects in our area are attempting to answer these needs and thereby also minimise the effect of detention.

We are seeking to respond more accurately and immediately to post-detention realities. This requires a strategy that works at both community and individual levels, giving long-term continuity while being sensitive to changes in the dynamics of our local situation.

FOOTNOTES

1. The Eastern Cape still has the largest overall percentage of detentions, taking the 19 months as a whole. Its load of the national total in the first year (12 June 1986 - 11 June 1987) was 36%, dropping to 19.9% in the second half of 1987.
2. According to government estimates, Alexandria township had 2234 inhabitants in 1985. 175 (8%) have been detained.
3. Protest from the Methodist Church has obliged the local Brigadier to launch an enquiry into the behaviour of police in the area.
4. From D.C. debriefing records.
5. 735 (77%) of a total sample of 952 people were detained in June/August 1985.
6. From D.C. debriefing records.

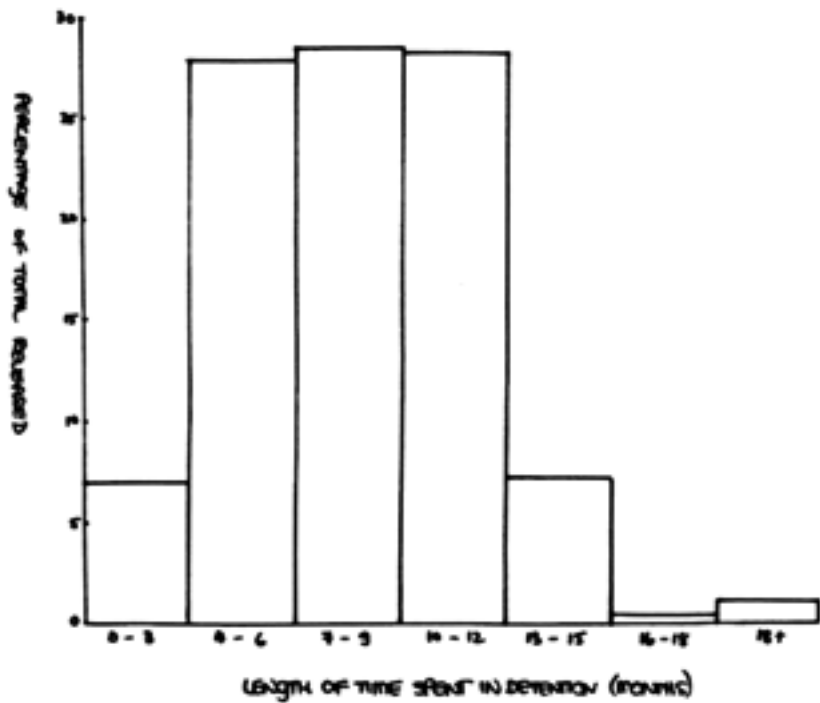


TABLE 1 : LENGTHS OF DETENTION (FROB RELEASED JUNE 86 - FEB 88)
 SAMPLE SIZE : 704

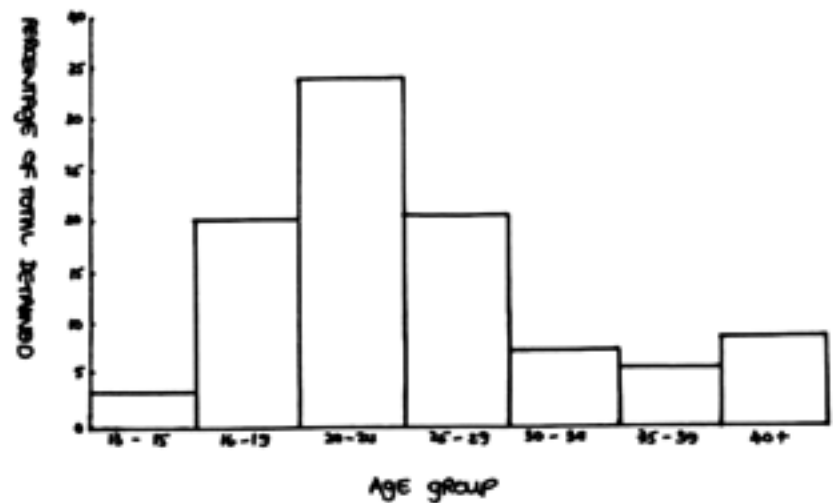


TABLE 2 : AGE GROUPS OF DETAINees
 SAMPLE SIZE : 789

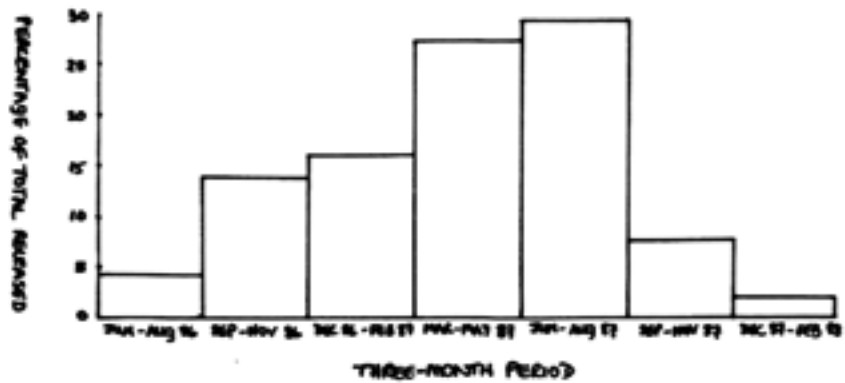


TABLE 4 : PATTERN OF RELEASES (THREE MONTHLY INTERVALS)
SAMPLE SIZE : 685

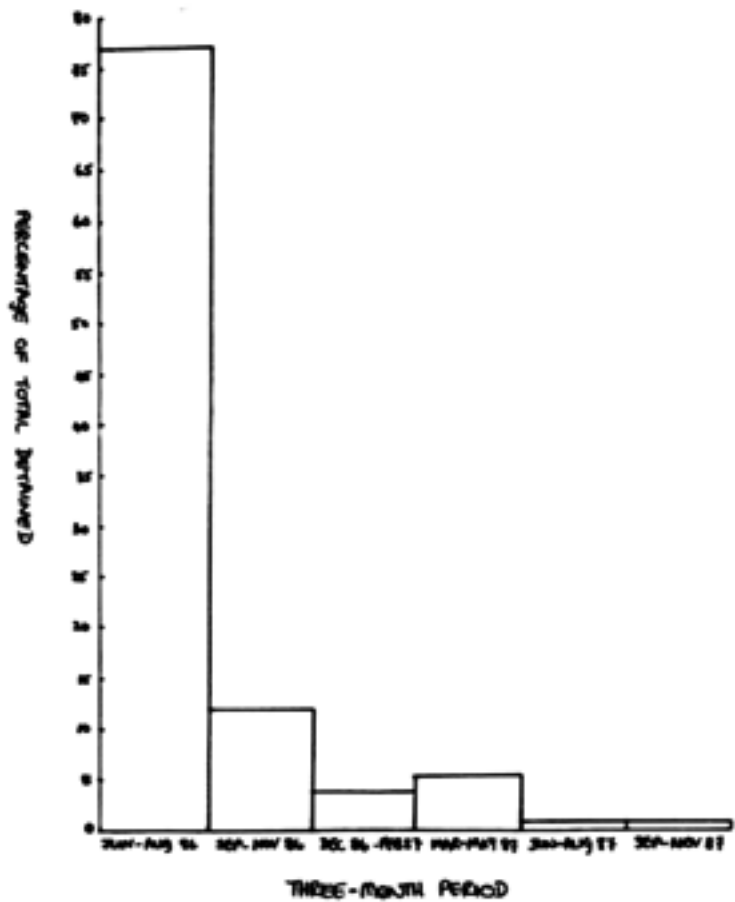


TABLE 3 : PATTERN OF DETENTIONS (THREE MONTHLY INTERVALS)
SAMPLE SIZE : 952