

PEOPLE'S COURTS.

MISSIONVALE, January, 1991.

Missionvale is situated on the fringe of Port Elizabeth's Northern Areas - an area inhabited almost totally by "coloured" residents. Its community have been described as "the poorest of the poor", numbering some 6,000 people. The unemployment rate is 85%, with the average income of a worker about R150. per month. Women employed as domestic workers in nearby Algoa Park earn R3. per day and men R5. per day on a casual basis. 2% of the houses have electricity and the great majority of residents live in extreme squalor in shacks.

Missionvale's main claim to fame was a visit from Nobel Peace Prize winner Mother Teresa in 1988, also the award given to Sister Ethel as Port Elizabeth's Woman of the Year for her devotion to the community and the work she does there running a clinic and community centre.

In June, 1990, Missionvale launched an Anti-Crime campaign in order to combat the fearful growth in crime in the area. The area had elected an Area committee and together with the Gelvandale Area Committee guidelines were worked out. According to a member of this committee the campaign fell down because many cases of crime were handed over to the police but no action was taken. He claims that the police response was that people should take their problems to the "comrades", or that they expressed disinterest and ignored the matter.

Even so, he felt that the crime rate dropped and many weapons were taken from "criminals".

However, over the Christmas, 1990 period the crime rate increased and some of the comrades got frustrated and, because of the lack of police support, decided to act "more strongly" against the criminals. He mentioned one case where a man "homicided his wife" and the police took no action against him. In addition, it seems the Labour party had a role in the heightened tension in the area with "vigilantes" carrying weapons protecting Labour Party member's houses in nearby Gelvandale. Claims are also made that members of the Northern Areas Co-ordinating Committee were harassed by these vigilantes and the police and had not been sleeping at home for some time. He also said that the police response to punishment being meted out by the community to criminals was that the people were "doing a good job" in controlling crime in this way. The police later denied they had given "support" for the courts.

On the 7th and 8th January, 1991, the police arrested some 27 people in connection with alleged brutality perpetrated at "kangaroo courts" in the Missionvale area. Reports in the Press said victims had received up to 220 lashes for various

offences committed against members of the community. Grim photos appeared in the local press. Accusations were levelled at the ANC as being the perpetrators of these punishments. Regional Chair of the ANC, Benson Fihla said the ANC was investigating these allegations.

A Civic Association had recently been established in Kleinskool (bordering on Missionvale), and I knew that they were due to have their launch that weekend. I made the suggestion to the ANC Publicity spokesman that it might be a good opportunity to set out the ANC's policy on people's justice, and their strong line against violence of any sort being used.

In fact, on the Sunday, 13th January, a top level ANC delegation went to the area to hear the facts of the case and to give their policy. Those arrested seemed to have been taken in an across the board arrest of ANC members and their wives for whom bail was set at R1.000. This was very high and after some weeks lawyers managed to get it reduced it to R500, even so some of the accused remain in prison.

Discussing the situation with civic and ANC people, it seems that undisciplined members of the community, angered by the criminal activity and lack of police response took the law into their own hands and meted out punishment in a very brutal manner. Some of these were ANC members, but it seems not on the local Civic Association. In general, the attitude taken towards those involved was anger and distress at the lack of discipline, but also at the police attitude and inadequacies - and its dissembling.

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