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Reviewed work(s):

Source: *Human Rights Quarterly*, Vol. 8, No. 3 (Aug., 1986), pp. 488-493

Published by: [The Johns Hopkins University Press](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/762272>

Accessed: 08/11/2012 08:57

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A Short Background to the Shooting Incident in Langa Township, Uitenhage

Thole Majodina

The shooting of a number of people in Langa Township, Uitenhage on 21 March 1985 must be seen in the context of the sociopolitical crisis of South Africa, particularly its Eastern Cape, to be understood. The upheavals in the Eastern Cape started in about the beginning of 1984 when school boycotts began in the town of Cradock. The school boycotts spread to other centers in the Eastern Cape such as Port Elizabeth, Grahamstown, Port Alfred, Graaf Reinet, and Uitenhage; by the latter half of 1984 virtually the whole Eastern Cape was experiencing school boycotts. The unrest has been attributed to a number of factors such as inferior education for blacks, the increase in the price of foodstuffs and bus fares, and the arrest of community leaders. For the most part all these factors work in combination – but it can be said that the most explosive is the issue of Bantu education. For many years since this system of education for blacks was introduced in the mid-1950s black people have expressed their utter abhorrence of it in several ways. Since 1976 black pupils and students themselves have actively joined in the battle. They have demonstrated their intense hatred of the system of education at various times and some have gone so far as to show that they are prepared to lay down their lives. In Uitenhage, in particular, these intense feelings of hatred on the part of the students were prevalent.

The vehicle which the students have used for the struggle is a student organization known as the Congress of South African Students (Cosas) which has town and regional branches throughout the country. It was formed in 1978. To further its aims, the most important of which is transforming the state of black education in the country, it has sought the cooperation and understanding of the parents and the community in some of its programs. As will be shown from what follows, Uitenhage has been and still is a very good example of how this measure of sympathy and cooperation between students and their parents was achieved within a relatively short time.

School boycotts began in Langa and KwaNobuhle, the black townships outside Uitenhage, around September 1984. The local branch of Cosas became concerned about the apparent lack of understanding on the part of the parents about what was going on and, more particularly, about the boycott's issues and implications. There was a gulf between the students and the community as a whole about the worrisome situation. A few Cosas executive committee members then approached some community leaders in an endeavor to bridge the gap. These community leaders were not, strictly speaking, leaders in certain sections of community life but rather were persons whom Cosas members regarded as generally enlightened and progressive in their attitudes. For instance, members of the local authority known as the Community Councils, which are generally hated and looked upon as stooge bodies for the government, were excluded. Some informal meetings took place between Cosas and the respected leaders. At these meetings the students voiced their grievances about the education they were receiving. These grievances included:

- (a) Lack of proper facilities in the schools, e.g., no laboratory equipment or apparatus;
- (b) Books which were supplied late in the year. Many were used textbooks which were taken away from schools in other boycott-stricken areas of the country;
- (c) Shortage of properly qualified teachers, especially in science subjects;
- (d) Old and dilapidated school buildings which were hardly suitable accommodation for schools;
- (e) School furniture of very inferior quality, e.g., tiny desks and chairs which were suitable for a lower primary school were used in a high school for years on end;
- (f) The general insecurity of the black child in a school which could be invaded by police at any time during school hours for arrests without notice or permission of the school authorities;
- (g) Resentment in some schools which was brought about by the fact that white staff members were police reservists who came to school armed every day.

The above list is not exhaustive. On hearing all these grievances the leaders became concerned and very sympathetic. They decided to call a mass meeting of the whole community in KwaNobuhle, to be held in the Community Hall on 7 November 1984. The purpose of the meeting was to inform the entire community about the causes of the school boycott and to

seek ways of resolving the matter. The meeting was widely publicized in KwaNobuhle in particular and there was tremendous public interest.

On the scheduled day the Security Police came to the venue about fifteen minutes before the 6:00 p.m. starting time. The police simply told the leaders and organizers that the meeting would not take place. They produced no order by an appropriate government official banning the meeting in terms of security legislation. Asked by the organizers why they were preventing the meeting from taking place, the police said they were not obliged to furnish reasons. People from all parts of KwaNobuhle were coming to the venue and for this reason the organizers felt obliged to wait for them and inform them accordingly. The police in the meantime came back to the venue time and again in their vehicles and told the organizers to see to it that people dispersed the minute they arrived at the place. Where the people had formed groups outside the venue before dispersing they were told by the police that they constituted an unlawful gathering and had to disperse at once. The meeting did not take place at all.

By November 7, when this meeting was cancelled, the residents of KwaNobuhle had formed a Parents Committee to become a liaison between Cosas and the community and also to explore ways of resolving the problem of school boycotts. The Parents Committee organized another community mass meeting which was to be held on 21 November 1984 at the same venue. At almost the last minute the Parents Committee was informed that the Community Council, i.e. the local authority, had not approved the use of the Community Hall for the meeting. The Parents Committee organized yet another meeting to take place at the venue on 28 November 1984. That meeting too was effectively barred by the police in almost the same way as described above. On this occasion the police made repeated threats to shoot when ordering the people to disperse. They also went searching for a leading member of a youth organization known as the Uitenhage Youth Congress before the time scheduled for the meeting and eventually arrested him.

The mood of the community was by now that of deep anger at being denied the opportunity to assemble freely to discuss a matter of grave concern in the community. As a matter of fact, when dispersing on November 28, part of the huge crowd outside the venue went on a rampage and nearly turned over the police motor cars. An empty bus passing by was stoned. The stage was then set for the continual confrontation between the community and the authorities, especially the police, which has brought about so much intense suffering, chaos, and killings in the Uitenhage area.

The mood of anger began to grow and soon manifested itself in some violent ways. Buses belonging to a company in Port Elizabeth were being stoned in KwaNobuhle; eventually the bus service was withdrawn. Commercial trucks making deliveries in the township were also stoned. The

houses of the Community Councillors were under attack and at the same time they were called upon to resign their seats in the Council. The attack on their houses and the calls for their resignations were sparked by an announcement that house rents were being increased. The residents refused to pay the increased rents. The Community Council eventually backed down on the issue of increased rents when cornered by the Ministers' Fraternal, an association of priests who had also joined forces with the people. The priests had argued forcefully that the increases were ill-timed and ill-advised when considered in light of the effects of the recession in Uitenhage, a place heavily dependent on the motor industry, the hardest-hit in the country.

A situation prevailed from January 1985 where schools were being boycotted, and buses and commercial vehicles were being damaged in stone-throwing incidents. Parents and children were united in their fight against glaring injustices. The Parents Committee, which consisted of five members when it was formed, had grown to twelve members. Some of the members were prominent figures in the community, drawn from the ranks of priests, teachers, and business leaders. Police presence and activity in the community also intensified. The township was heavily patrolled, especially by members of the Riot Unit. Shooting incidents increased by day. Many innocent victims were being shot by the police day and night and many were arrested and detained. Those who had to receive treatment in a hospital were kept under police guard and prosecuted when discharged from hospital; a handful disappeared without trace. A number of people were also killed in the shooting incidents. Funerals of victims followed. The authorities, especially the police, interfered with the course of events flowing from these killings. The families of the dead were served with orders issued under the security legislation which compels them to bury the dead on weekdays and not during weekends, as is the customary practice. Vigils, which were held all around the township and were well attended by residents, were disrupted by the police. Tear gas was thrown at the houses in question in the dead of night and when people ran out of a house they were shot or beaten.

During the day a great number of people from the townships went to the courts to look for their next of kin and relatives who had disappeared. Although some were found, some were not. All those found had been charged with public violence. Initially the courts granted bail ranging from R100 to R200 per person. As legal representatives I and others made enquiries, mostly by telephone, to the police concerning those who were missing. These were distressing occasions to say the least. No information could be obtained for the reason that the investigating officers in charge of the various cases were out of their offices working on investigations. When an attorney was lucky enough to find an officer, the attorney's qualifications or credentials were questioned. A common remark made by the police was simply: "I do not know if you are an attorney and I cannot give you any infor-

mation over the telephone!" When information was given at all we were advised that investigations were under way and bail could not be granted. The legal representatives had to make formal applications in court for bail. In some but not all the cases bail was granted. There were often long delays in the process, largely as a result of the fact that the police opposed bail and would not come to court to state their grounds for such opposition.

It is convenient at this stage to mention the important role the funerals of the victims play in the community. The funerals are not only a concern of bereaved families, relatives, and friends, but are great events in the community. Residents in their multitudes throng the funerals, which are in fact the only available opportunity for assembly by the people. Calls for unity are made at the funerals, freedom songs are sung, hard-hitting speeches against all forms of injustices are delivered, and important announcements are made by various organizations. Over the years the government has been aware of the useful function served by funerals. That is why the authorities are empowered under security legislation to ban funerals over weekends and to direct that they be held on weekdays when fewer people are able to attend.

An important factor in the build-up to the shooting incident on 21 March 1985 is the realization on the part of the residents that even this very last platform, the community funeral, was being ruthlessly taken away from them. The authorities not only order the families concerned to bury their dead on a weekday, they also determine the route the funeral procession must take from the church or house in question to the cemetery and stipulate the number of hours over which the funeral must be held. It is also not infrequent for the order to state that mourners are to travel in vehicles and not on foot. During the week workers are not able to attend the funerals. Because the workers are conscious of their role in community life, particularly through trade unions, it is not difficult to imagine the great resentment which results from interference of this kind by the authorities.

A number of persons (about eight in all) were shot by the police and killed in KwaNobuhle during the second week of March 1985. Of these victims, three were to be buried by their families. The police gave orders to the families concerned to bury each victim on one of three consecutive dates—21, 22, and 23 March 1985. The residents angrily demanded that they all be buried in one mass funeral on Saturday, 23 March 1985. The workers made it clear at the same time that if the funerals were to be held on the three dates mentioned above, they would stay away from work on Thursday, March 21 and Friday, March 22 to attend the funerals. The workers were aware of and angered by the fact that their white foremen were police reservists who did the shooting at night in the townships and came back to the factory floor on the following morning only to wave jubilantly the clock cards of some of those workers who were not at work and

were therefore presumed to be victims. As a result of the workers' proposed stay-away from the work place, management, for obvious reasons, became worried. It is known that they tried to prevail on the authorities concerned not ban weekend funerals.

The result was that on the night of Wednesday, 20 March 1985 the police went to the three families concerned and advised them that they would be allowed to bury their dead jointly on Sunday, 24 March 1985 in KwaNobuhle. This announcement was not well received by the families, who had by then finalized their funeral arrangements. Nonetheless the families felt powerless to defy the last-minute change because of the fact that their dead were in police custody at government mortuaries and could be released to them for burial only when the police chose to do so.

After advising the families concerned on the change of dates of the funerals, the police travelled in one main road at KwaNobuhle and announced the change through a loud hailer very late that night. The police then proceeded to Langa on the other side of Uitenhage and in Maduna Road at about midnight they made a similar announcement through a loud hailer.

The large procession of an estimated 5,000 people who marched along Maduna Road on the way to KwaNobuhle when the shooting incident occurred were supposed to know that the first funeral planned for March 21 had since been postponed.

Prior to the shooting incident on Thursday, 21 March 1985, various organizations were repeatedly calling upon the authorities to withdraw the police presence in the township as a prerequisite to peace and order. The police were also asked to bring an end to the atrocities they were perpetrating in the townships. All these calls were ignored. The Ministers' Fraternal became so concerned about the escalating violence that it asked the Divisional Commissioner of the Police for the Eastern Cape to meet its delegation on 21 March 1985 to discuss the matter. The meeting did not occur because of the cold-blooded shooting in Langa at 10:00 a.m. that day.

The foregoing is a factual background which the writer feels is necessary to an understanding of the shooting incident which shocked the world.