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Natal/KwaZulu, Buthelezi and the ANC: What's Behind the Violence?

Fighting in South Africa's Natal province since 1987 has killed more than 3,000 people, more than the strife in Beirut or in Northern Ireland. In August of 1990, the battle spread to the Johannesburg area, leaving more than 800 dead by mid-September. But the media catchphrase

"black-on-black violence" does nothing to explain what's behind the killing. And references to "tribal violence" or "rival anti-apartheid groups" seriously distort the reality.

Chief Gatsha Buthelezi's one-party KwaZulu state, set up by the apartheid regime to rule Zulu South Africans, is attempting to forcibly suppress unions



Demonstrators protest fighting that has claimed thousands of lives in the Natal province.

and any other independent political forces in its territory. In Natal and at the national level right-wingers in the police are working with Buthelezi's Inkatha movement to provoke violence and sidetrack peaceful negotiations. And some employers are encouraging Inkatha because the ethnic strife between Zulu and Xhosa workers

helps split the rank and file in the unions.

The Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU), churches and other anti-apartheid organizations are demanding an end to the violence and freedom of organization for unions and community groups. African

National Congress (ANC) leaders are trying to restrain their followers. But peace will be elusive unless the government's security forces take a more even-handed role.

This briefing paper presents an overview of the background to this violence which threatens to derail the transition to a post-apartheid South Africa.

Buthelezi, KwaZulu and Inkatha

Chief Gatsha Buthelezi is often described simply as the leader of more than six million Zulus. But his rise to power and the shifts in his political fortunes are in fact a complex story.

A minor chief in the 1950s and 1960s, Buthelezi was part of the South African system for administration of the rural areas reserved for Africans. Unlike his fellow Zulu chief Albert Luthuli, who was dismissed by Pretoria for his leadership in ANC protests, Buthelezi kept a low political profile. When South Africa created the Zululand territorial authority in 1970, the other chiefs chose Buthelezi as chief executive officer. The KwaZulu constitution in 1972, drawn up by the South African government, strengthened Buthelezi's powers and relegated the traditional Zulu king, Goodwill Zwelethini, to a purely ceremonial role.

In line with the apartheid policy, the KwaZulu administration was given direct authority over rural Zulus, as well as some living close to urban areas in Natal province. Zulus living in 'white' areas were also eligible for KwaZulu citizenship. The majority of the KwaZulu legislative assembly is composed of appointed chiefs; the minority of elected members also consists entirely of supporters of Buthelezi.

In the 1970s, Buthelezi portrayed his participation in the homeland government as a strategy for working against apartheid from within the system. He occasionally clashed verbally with the central South African government. At times he appealed to traditional symbols of Zulu greatness; on other occasions he evoked the heritage of the ANC, hinting that he symbolically represented the banned organization inside the country.

Black resistance inside South Africa was only gradually reemerging after the repression of the early 1960s, and Buthelezi's stand had some credibility at the time. Steve Biko and the

Black Consciousness movement that became prominent in the mid-1970s strongly criticized Buthelezi and other homeland leaders for collaboration with the apartheid regime. But as late as 1979, the exiled leadership of the ANC maintained regular contact with Buthelezi, hoping that his ambivalence would be resolved in favor of the anti-apartheid cause.

In 1975 Buthelezi revived an earlier Zulu cultural organization called Inkatha. The new organization was designed to reinforce traditional Zulu identity and to serve as a political machine tying all Zulus to the KwaZulu power structure. Inkatha leadership and the KwaZulu legislative assembly are tightly intertwined. Buthelezi claimed in 1975 that "all members of the Zulu nation are automatically members of Inkatha if they are Zulus." Inkatha also adopted the ANC colors and sought to portray itself as the heir of ANC founding fathers like Chief Luthuli. In theory Inkatha was open to non-Zulus, but

it failed to attract more than a few.

As the 1980s began, Buthelezi's support rested on several pillars. Rural Zulus in particular responded to his appeals to ethnic and traditional values and in any case were accustomed to taking direction from their chiefs. Others less convinced on these grounds saw him as an anti-apartheid spokesperson. In a 1977 survey by German researchers, 78 percent of urban Blacks in Natal said they supported Buthelezi, as did 28 percent in the Johannesburg area. Within KwaZulu, however, this support depended as much on patronage as on conviction. Access to land, government jobs, housing and recruitment for labor in the mines depended on good ties with the Inkatha political machine.

In the last decade, as organizing by students, unions and anti-apartheid groups took root among Black South Africans in Natal as elsewhere, Buthelezi's support dropped precipitously. In response, Inkatha turned



A policeman forces a township resident to remove a street barricade. Residents erected barricades to prevent police access because they believed police were supporting Inkatha attacks.

repeatedly to violence, often with the tacit cooperation of the South African security forces.

Anti-Apartheid Resistance in Natal: Students, Workers and Communities

As portrayed by the media overseas, Buthelezi often appears as a moderate advocate of non-violent opposition to apartheid, distinguishing himself from the ANC by his opposition to the armed struggle. In practice, Buthelezi has also opposed the non-violent resistance that grew inside South Africa, because it posed a challenge to his political monopoly and to his role as administrator of apartheid institutions. Until recently, the conflict was almost entirely in Natal. Far from being conflict between different ethnic groups, it was Buthelezi's effort to suppress any rival organization among Zulus.

The first prominent confrontation was with student activists, who in 1980 organized successful boycotts of apartheid education in KwaMashu and Umlazi, two Durban townships under KwaZulu administration. Buthelezi denounced the students and organized armed Inkatha members to force the students to return to classes. They attacked many students in the townships and at the University of Zululand. In 1983 protest at the university against a planned Inkatha rally on campus resulted in an Inkatha attack on student dormitories, killing five students.

Even larger confrontations came in the second half of the decade, after the formation of the United Democratic Front (UDF) in 1983 and the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) in 1985. The UDF's community organizations directly threatened Buthelezi, because Inkatha was involved in government-sponsored community councils even in townships not directly under KwaZulu administration. Rent strikes and other campaigns in black townships targeted these government bod-

ies, and were suppressed by the apartheid regime. Inkatha was allowed to operate freely, and became even more identified with the government structures.

Of 200 violent incidents in Natal from January-April 1990, 195 were attributed to Inkatha.

The KwaZulu administration, moreover, had developed close links with white business in Natal, who invested in cheap labor in the homeland, and had promoted a small group of black businessmen with patronage. In early strikes in Natal in 1973, KwaZulu official Barney Dladla had helped mediate and won respect from workers and unions. But he was soon dismissed by Buthelezi.

In the 1980s Buthelezi opposed independent union organizing, and promoted an Inkatha-linked trade union federation, with a slate of officers primarily of businessmen and Inkatha officials.

In addition to criticizing the ANC's armed struggle, Buthelezi opposed strikes and stay-aways as well as economic sanctions because, he said, they damaged the South African economy. He also denounced the UDF and COSATU as surrogates for the ANC. He especially attacked prominent Indians and Xhosa-speaking blacks among the leaders of the three organizations.

A 'moderate' vis-a-vis the apartheid regime, Buthelezi quickly turned to the rhetoric of violence when speaking of action against his opponents, recalling the martial virtues of Zulu conqueror Shaka. More and more Black South Africans concluded

that his ambivalence was tilting to the side of the regime. By mid-1985, a survey among urban Blacks by the Institute for Black Research showed that Chief Buthelezi's support in Natal had dropped to 33 percent, 45 percentage points less than in 1977. In the Johannesburg area it was down to only five percent. A *Sunday Times* poll the same year showed only slightly higher percentages for Buthelezi.

The Escalation of Violence and the Role of the Police

In 1984 and 1985, with initial outbreaks in Durban, and sustained conflict around Pietermaritzburg since 1987, Inkatha repeatedly launched violent attacks on anti-apartheid unions, community organizations and communities perceived to be supporters of the ANC. ANC 'comrades' in the townships fought back in self-defense and sometimes initiated retaliatory raids. There have been incidents of indiscriminate violence on both sides.

Evidence from independent observers as well as legal affidavits collected by COSATU and UDF attorneys show, however, that:

- Almost all large-scale attacks have been initiated by organized groups of armed Inkatha warriors against individuals and communities who declined to join Inkatha.
- Prominent Inkatha members, as well as members of the KwaZulu police, which is recruited and directed by Buthelezi's administration, have been involved in the attacks.
- With only a few exceptions, neither the KwaZulu police nor the South African police have taken action against Inkatha gangs, nor have perpetrators been charged despite affidavits naming specific individuals and killings.
- Retaliatory actions by township 'comrades' have been largely

spontaneous, not organized by leaders of the ANC, COSATU or UDF. Nevertheless, police action after clashes has included raids to disarm township residents and repeated detentions of anti-apartheid leaders.

Detailed chronologies and support for these conclusions can be found in the sources listed below. The following is a brief outline of the evolution of the violence.

Durban 1984-1985

In 1984 tension rose in the Durban townships of Lamontville and Hambanathi, where residents opposed plans for incorporation into KwaZulu. In one incident in August Inkatha vigilantes, accompanied by South African police, burned ten houses and killed Alfred Sithole, a

In some incidents around Johannesburg, special squads of provocateurs started the violence, then left township residents and Zulu migrant workers to fight each other.

schoolteacher and community leader. UDF supporters were driven out of Hambanathi in fear of their lives.

On August 1, 1985, UDF activist and civil rights lawyer Victoria Mxenge was assassinated, reportedly by a South African government death squad. Student protests in Black townships were followed by some looting. Buthelezi threatened that the "anger of the people" would be unleashed against what he termed "misguided children and thugs." Inkatha

accused the UDF, the South African Council of Churches (SACC) and local pastors of stirring up trouble. On August 7 a memorial service for Mxenge in Umlazi township was attacked by 300 Inkatha warriors. At least four mourners were killed. But a South African police spokesman said he was unaware of the incident.

Over the next weeks Inkatha warriors roamed through Umlazi and KwaMashu townships, purportedly restoring law and order. Newspaper reports and affidavits catalogued attacks on funerals, burnings of homes of anti-apartheid leaders and killings of youth who refused to join Inkatha. The police teargassed and dispersed anti-apartheid gatherings, but withdrew their patrols during Inkatha attacks. Among the victims of the unrest were Indians in Inanda township, whose houses and shops were burned by unknown Africans suspected to be linked with Inkatha.

As a result of the violence, support for Inkatha among urban Africans in Natal dropped even lower. A random survey by the Institute for Black Research in the Durban metropolitan area in September found that support for Inkatha fell from 20 percent to five percent, while support for the UDF jumped from 26 percent to 51 percent.

Pietermaritzburg 1987-1990

Inkatha attacks in this area of Natal grew initially out of a protracted strike at BTR Sarmcol by the Metal and Allied Workers Union. Inkatha opposed sympathy strikes for the BTR Sarmcol workers and in December 1986 three strikers were killed by a group of Inkatha members. Although police arrested several suspects, they were never brought to court and later released.

In May 1987 COSATU and the UDF called a national stayaway to protest the whites-only elections. Chief Buthelezi opposed the stayaway, but some 90% of workers in the Pietermaritzburg area stayed home. Buthelezi blamed union bus drivers, and as many as 12 were killed



Baby teargassed in township violence.

as Inkatha tried to force the drivers to leave COSATU and join the Inkatha-backed United Workers Union. This was accompanied by massive Inkatha forced recruiting drives in townships around Pietermaritzburg. Communities which refused were burned out; opponents of Inkatha sometimes retaliated against communities seen as Inkatha strongholds. According to a University of Natal compilation, there were 403 political killings in the area in 1987, 690 in 1988, and a total of over 3,000 by mid-1990.

Following the release of Nelson Mandela in February 1990, the violence escalated, as it became clear that a one-person-one-vote system would leave Buthelezi a marginal figure. Shortly after his release Mandela drew a crowd of 120,000 supporters in Durban; Buthelezi, who claimed to represent Durban's Zulu-speaking Africans, only drew 10,000. Inkatha's response was to rely on its advantage in force: of 200 violent incidents in Natal from January-April 1990, 195 were attributed to Inkatha.

Inkatha warriors, allowed by police to carry "traditional" weapons, attacked townships repeatedly. In some cases, according to eyewitnesses, thousands of warriors were bussed in for the attacks. Charges of involvement of KwaZulu police were confirmed when the Natal Supreme Court in June 1990 issued an injunc-

tion "interdicting members of the police from assaulting, harassing or engaging in any unlawful attacks" in the township of KwaMakhuta.

In 1989 and again in 1990, attorneys for COSATU compiled detailed dossiers of bias and occasional direct involvement in the violence by both KwaZulu and South African police. But despite legal actions, and the presence at times of military units seen as less partial than the police, the government refused to arrest warlords and other named individuals responsible for killings.

Transvaal 1990

Beginning in late July 1990, the violence spread to the Transvaal. The first incident came only a week after Buthelezi announced Inkatha's transformation into a political party that would recruit whites as well as Blacks around the country. By mid-September the death toll exceeded 800. As in Natal, observers reported that Inkatha supporters initiated most attacks, and that police action was rarely impartial. But in the multiethnic Transvaal context, the violence often took on an ethnic character. It also pitted migrant residents of the single-sex hostels against longer-term urban residents in townships and squatter camps.

Inkatha organized first among Zulu-speaking hostel residents with ties to families in KwaZulu. Some were already Inkatha supporters, but eyewitness reports said others were forced to join in the violence. Hostel dwellers who refused to join Inkatha, especially Xhosas and other non-Zulus, were killed or expelled from the hostels. Then Inkatha attacked squatter camps near the hostels; residents retaliated with attacks on the hostels.

As in Natal, observers reported that police were slow to disarm Inkatha, but concentrated their raids against Inkatha's opponents. But there were also persistent eyewitness reports that whites were involved in a number of attacks. Themba Khoza, leader of the Inkatha Youth Brigade,

who was among the few Inkatha members arrested, was seen leading an attack in Sebokeng in September, armed and accompanied by four whites. In this and other incidents, the ANC charged, special squads of provocateurs moved into an area to start the violence, then left hostel dwellers and township residents to fight each other.

A Zulu hostel resident interviewed anonymously by the *Weekly Mail* reported that he was forced to join in the fighting and wear the red headband identifying Inkatha supporters. His only alternative would be to flee the hostels, he said, and even then Inkatha might retaliate against his family at home.

Although senior police officials professed the desire to maintain impartial law and order, and Inkatha warriors were disarmed in some incidents, the general perception in the townships was that rank-and-file police tended to side with Inkatha.

Additionally, new accusations surfaced, so far without specific confirmation, that some of the killers might not be Inkatha at all, but pro-

fessionals linked with South Africa's death squads and surrogate armies such as Renamo from neighboring Mozambique. In one attack on a commuter train in early September, gunmen killed at least 26, without saying a word, leading to speculation that they might be concealing foreign accents.

In mid-September, the South African police announced Operation "Iron Fist" to crackdown on the violence, but the ANC charged that the crackdown was aimed at the community rather than the violence. President de Klerk admitted the possibility of involvement of a 'third force' in the violence, but refused to allow an independent inquiry.

Prospects for Peace

Negotiations between Inkatha and representatives of COSATU, the UDF and recently the ANC as well have repeatedly failed to end the violence. Before this year, key negotiators on the anti-apartheid side have sometimes been detained by police. At times the violence has taken on a momentum which the leadership cannot control. Recently, negotiators have met on several occasions. But Buthelezi has claimed that the violence can only be resolved through the ANC's recognition of Inkatha's equal status, and bilateral talks between himself and Nelson Mandela.

In September and October, local negotiations appeared to stem the violence in some areas. In some cases police officials were credited for making an effort to keep the peace and arrest offenders. And a high-level meeting including Mandela and Buthelezi was planned. But the prospects for a durable peace were still precarious given the differences.

The ANC and COSATU agree that Buthelezi and Inkatha should participate in the formulation of a new constitution for South Africa, but say that competition for political support should be peaceful and that elections to a constituent assembly

*"We must take
responsibility for
restraining our forces ...
but when the other
side is constantly
attacking and it's
not being restrained,
then there can be
no success."*

— Willies Mchunu,
National Union of
Mineworkers of South Africa

must be democratic. In the interim they demand that policing be impartial and that anyone responsible for violence be arrested and charged in the courts.

In contrast, Buthelezi, like the South African government, is fearful to give up the option of force when democracy would leave him with only

a minority of votes. The more the ANC wins public support, the greater the temptation for Inkatha to use violence.

Since the South African government is still responsible for law and order, the demand for impartial policing is directed to President de Klerk. It is still unclear, however,

whether de Klerk is most interested in stopping the violence or in using it to weaken the ANC. As long as the government is seen as promoting Inkatha, and as failing to control the right-wing within its own security forces, any talks to stop the violence are unlikely to produce lasting peace.

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