Heed the Cries Lest 'Hippos' Triumph

By H. PAUL SANTMIRE

The three "Hippos" descended upon us soon after our two VW vans had entered Soweto, the beleaguered black township 10 miles outside Johannesburg, South Africa.

These were not the animals tourists go to see. These were trucklike army personnel carriers, filled with young white men in helmets, looking down on us from their protected places behind the steel walls of those vehicles. "Hippo" is a term of derision invented by the residents of the townships.

Did we have a permit? What were we doing there in the first place? What were our intentions?

We explained to the soldiers that we were members of the Lutheran Church in America on our way to visit Lutheran churches in the township. Nevertheless the men in the Hippos demanded that we go with them to the nearest police station.

After an hour's anxious wait, we were released. But the same scene was repeated a few hours later, when army troops stopped a funeral procession that they had been escorting in their Hippos so they could check us out.

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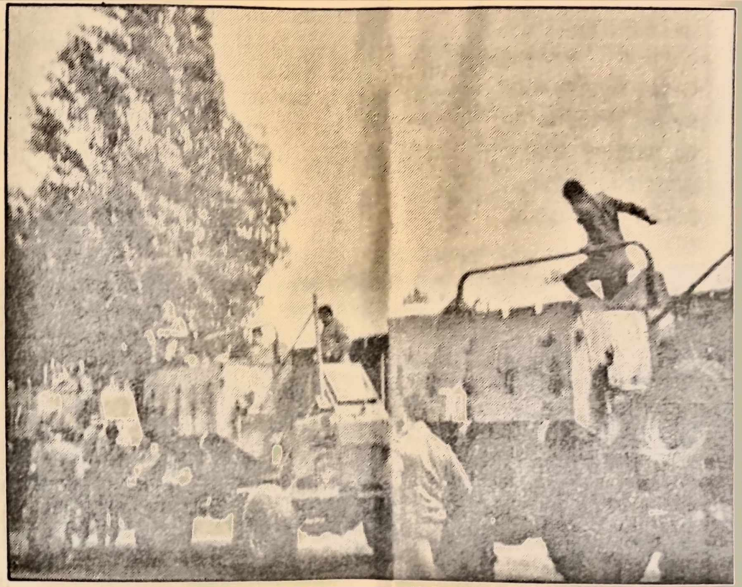
The funeral was for a young girl who had been shot the week before during yet another time of "unrest," in the wake of the state of emergency imposed by the South African government. Again, the troops wanted to know what we were doing there.

Fortunately, we were within our rights, even under the government's internationally condemned state of emergency regulations. But the encounter with those Hippos in that explosive arena was a sobering introduction to life in South Africa.

That three of the 17 members of our fact-finding group were black made many South Africans look at us twice, wherever we went. Our three-week journey took us into every region of the country and into Namibia [South-West Africa] as well. We met with a range of church and business leaders, the unemployed, people of privilege as well as former "detainees" and political prisoners.

Soweto was a revealing place to begin. Most of its 2 million residents live in a constant state of terror, especially since the imposition of the state of emergency by South African President Pieter W. Botha.

One 20-year-old woman told us a typically haunting story. She and a disabled friend were walking in the street on their way home from work.



H. Paul Santmire / Special to The Courant

South African 'Hippos,' armored personnel carriers, which detained the author and his companions in Soweto, photographed through a car window.

Suddenly soldiers appeared and began shooting. The two women began to run, but the one with the disability could not run fast enough. She was shot in the back and died there on the street as her friend watched in horror.

The many accounts we heard about police and army brutality from black Christians in every region of South Africa are borne out by the statistics gathered by the South African Council of Churches for the country as a whole. In the 12 months preceding our visit, 700 people were killed in South Africa, most of them by the police or the army, an average of two people a day. In August alone, 163 were killed, an average of more than five people a day.

During the same period, thousands of people were injured in the townships and more than 10,000 were "detained," including 2,000 schoolchildren. By law, detainees have few, if any, civil rights. They can be taken anywhere for any length of time and be held without any contact with the outside world.

This is a particularly frightful experience for most black detainees. The associate director of the Black Sash, an internationally respected women's group that works with the

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families of prisoners, told us: "It is a kind of national sport here to beat up black prisoners."

The violence of the state of emergency has also turned neighbors against neighbors. The daughter of one of the pastors we met was killed by a mob last July. She had been identified as a collaborator. She had, in fact, been seen often with a policeman, who happened to have been her boyfriend.

All this extraordinary violence during the state of emergency has been superimposed on the more "ordinary" state of violence characteristic of this apartheid society.

Thousands of families have been forcibly separated, as the government has ruthlessly pursued its policy of forced removals. I talked with an unemployed factory worker who lives in a small room with 15 other men. They have a coal stove for cooking and outdoor plumbing only. He will soon have to move back to his "homeland" because he has no work in the Soweto area.

But that offers a dim prospect at best, since unemployment is rampant there. How will he ever be able to support his family of six again? Nor will he be able to return to Soweto once he has moved away, even it he were able to find work in the area. He and his family seem doomed to the most marginal existence.

At the "resettlement area" of Onverwacht, in the center of the country, we heard the same kind of story. Two-hundred thousand people have been forcibly removed from their residences elsewhere and crammed into this isolated rural wasteland, where the clay soil has become as hard as cement because of drought.

"Here the chickens live much better than the people," a young American missionary told us. The chickens in a nearby government-funded small business development have electricity, plenty of food and potable water, well-built, disease-free cement houses and regular medical attention. The people who live in the resettlement area generally have none of these things.

Such shaking revelations greeted us at every turn, not only in Soweto and Onverwacht, in the east and central sections of the country, but at Cape Town in the west and in Namibia in the north.

But none of us came home from our journey depressed, as well we might have, had we not been praying and worshiping and conversing with fellow Christians who are deeply involved in the struggle for justice in the region. They were a constant inspiration.

Nobel Peace Prize winner, Bishop Desmond M. Tutu, reminded us of some of the deeper, more immovable foundations of the apartheid system. First, he said, unlike the blacks and their white supporters in the United States during the 1960s, South African blacks and their friends do not have the force of law on their side. To the contrary, apartheid is the law there.

Second, an appeal to the consciences of the ruling white minority, like the one led by the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. in America, is out of the question in South Africa. "There is no morality here in the governing classes," he said, "only a kind of mindless acceptance of authority."

Yet Tutu's robust faith and his willingness to take up his own cross told a story far brighter and deeper than the dark and narrow realities of the apartheid system. "We will not lose heart," he said to us, "no matter how much we have to suffer."

We felt compelled to ask some questions because we knew that they were on the minds of people back home. What about communist influence among the liberation forces in the region? Here the remarks of Bishop Kleopas Dumeni of the Evangelical Lutheran Owambokavango Church of Namibia about the South-West Africa People's Organization were typical.

"Communism is not our problem," he said, "that's an American problem. Most of our people have never heard of communism. We are fighting for our freedom and for bread, not for some foreign ideology.

"Indeed, the vast majority of our 300,000 members support SWAPO. And those thousands of SWAPO members who have gone to join the liberation forces north of our border are our sons and fathers. They are in our care. We are one with them."

What about the use of violence by some of the liberation forces in southern Africa?

"Of course all Christians must condemn any form of violence," commented the distinguished Namibian theologian, Zephaniah Kameeta, who was himself thrown into solitary confinement for a month two years ago because he had publicly condemned the injustices of apartheid.

"Nevertheless," he continued, "we must always ask 'which violence?' when we condemn violence. People usually think of the violence committed by 'terrorists.' But what precipitated that violence?

"We would not have violent responses to the South African forces in our country if those forces were not illegally and oppressively here in the first place. The violence of the oppressor is one thing. The violence of self-defense is another."

Our hosts often had questions and suggestions for us, particularly regarding the issue of sanctions and disinvestment. Dean Simon Farisani of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of South Africa concisely stated the constant refrain we heard: "Keep up the pressure." Only a few white Lutherans and some business people with whom we talked thought otherwise.

"Yes, I may lose my job," said a young clerk in Soweto, "if these pressures continue. But our suffering as a people is far too great to make me think twice about the question."

Consistently and often we were told by blacks that the Reagan administration's policy of constructive engagement has in fact been destructive for them. The Namibians were especially resentful of President Reagan's refusal to support U.N. Resolution 435, which mandated supervised elections for them on the question of independence.

The time for business-as-usual in U.S. relationships with South Africa is over. The time for heavy pressure is at hand, for more sanctions, more divestment, more protests in the streets and more pressure on our allies, such as the British and the Germans, to do the same. The time to heed the cry of the oppressed in southern Africa is here, to take a stand with them before it is too late, before the power of the Hippos triumphs utterly.