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**THIS WEEK:**

- \* Racism and sexism: An assault on the dignity of all our people
- \* Crisis in Gaza: Stop the collective punishment of the Palestinian people

**RACISM AND SEXISM**

An assault on the dignity of all our people

The acts of abuse and humiliation committed last year by students from the University of the Free State, which were captured on a video leaked last week to the media, are an assault on the human dignity of all South Africans.

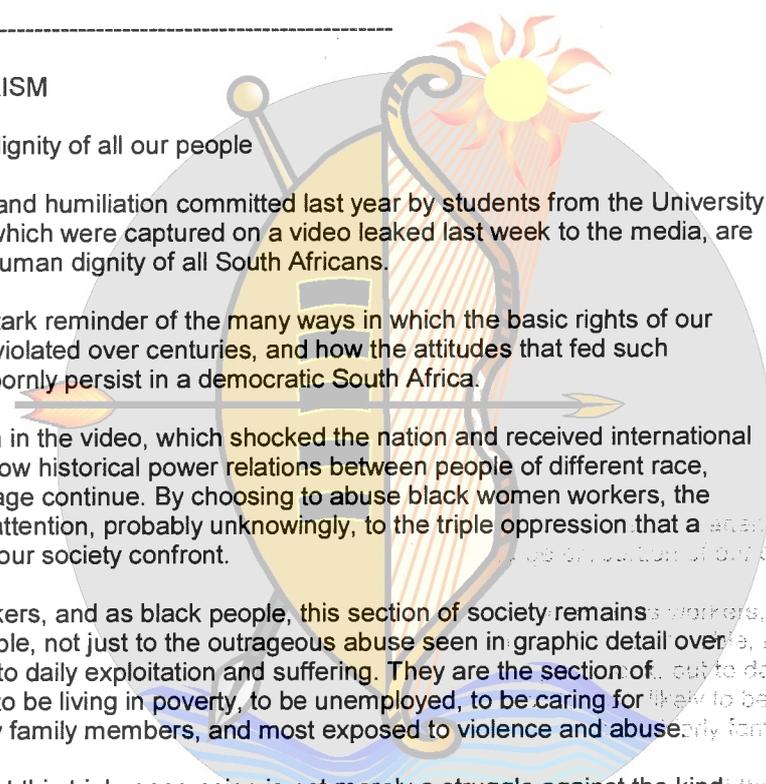
These acts are a stark reminder of the many ways in which the basic rights of our people have been violated over centuries, and how the attitudes that fed such violations still stubbornly persist in a democratic South Africa.

The incident shown in the video, which shocked the nation and received international attention, reveals how historical power relations between people of different race, gender, class and age continue. By choosing to abuse black women workers, the perpetrators drew attention, probably unknowingly, to the triple oppression that a large proportion of our society confront.

As women, as workers, and as black people, this section of society remains particularly vulnerable, not just to the outrageous abuse seen in graphic detail over the past week, but to daily exploitation and suffering. They are the section of society most likely to be living in poverty, to be unemployed, to be caring for children and elderly family members, and most exposed to violence and abuse.

The struggle against this triple oppression is not merely a struggle against the kind of hateful barbarism shown by four young men in the Free State; but a struggle against the social, cultural, political and economic chains that bind black women workers. It poses a challenge to deepen efforts to remove all of these chains. Centrally, this must include intensifying the ANC's economic and social transformation programmes aimed at improving the lives of the poorest.

The Polokwane Conference resolutions on a comprehensive social security net, accelerated housing provision, improved access to health care and quality education, the expanded public works programme, and rural development, among others, need to be implemented. The pursuit of accelerated economic growth must be accompanied by the creation of decent jobs for poor women and effective interventions to improve



opportunities for those in the second economy.

It also requires a concerted assault on the patriarchal relations that permeate all facets of social interaction, whether in the home, in the workplace, in schools, in political organisations, in the media, or in the countless other places where women are discriminated against and oppressed.

The depth of sexist attitudes in our society was evident in another recent incident, this time in Johannesburg, where a young woman was harassed and abused by taxi drivers because of the clothes she was wearing. It shares in common with the Free State incident the actions of a few South Africans that infringe on the rights of other South Africans on the basis of attitudes that should have no place in a democratic society, particularly in a country that has fought so hard against racism and sexism, and for which so many people have sacrificed.

The sense of general outrage that these incidents provoked among ordinary South Africans, both black and white, does however point to the progress made in developing respect for human rights and a rejection of overt racism and sexism. It shows a society that has travelled some way along the road towards a non-racial and non-sexist future - a society which, although still faced with the legacy and reality of racism and sexism, is nevertheless struggling to overcome its past.

Such incidents do not signal a return to the trenches of racial animosity. Nor should they be quickly buried to ensure a semblance of normality. They should be used as an opportunity for reflection and debate. Society should be able to discuss such incidents openly and frankly, better to understand the many ways that racism, sexism and class oppression (and ageism) still affect our people. And then to discuss how all South Africans, working together, can overcome these remnants of our divided and brutal past.

This theme was reflected in discussions that took place at this week's meeting of the national cabinet. A statement released after the meeting dealt with these issues in some detail. The relevant section reads as follows:

"Cabinet took a dim view of a number of incidents that have the potential to undermine the country's goal of building a democratic, non-racial and non-sexist society. The meeting strongly condemned the production of a racist video by four students at the University of the Free State. The humiliation of workers who are old enough to be their parents is totally unacceptable and cannot, under any circumstances, be condoned by anyone. This incident highlights the fact that racism still remains one of the major challenges that face our young democracy.

"This shocking video exposes deep-seated racist stereotypes that are harboured by a section of our population and constitutes a complete disregard for the rights only of the workers of the institution but a total disrespect for adults. All South Africans must condemn such conduct and ensure that no South African, either black or white, can be subjected to such dehumanising and disrespectful behaviour. Government believes that the majority of South Africans are trying hard to emerge from the apartheid legacy of racial discrimination and no effort must be spared in ensuring that the South African project of building a united nation is not undermined by individuals who are opposed to transformation. The University of the Free State must show strong leadership by bringing those responsible to book and setting an example to all institutions of higher learning by adopting concrete measures to abolish all forms of racism in the institution.

"All heads of public and private institutions have a responsibility to create

conditions that would entrench constitutional values in their institutions and they must urgently take steps to ensure that all vestiges of apartheid are removed henceforth. It cannot be acceptable that our universities, schools and other public and private institutions can continue to tolerate apartheid practices such as racially segregated residences and other facilities. Government calls on all our institutions to review their policies and practices with a view to making sure that the values as enshrined in our constitution such as non-sexism, non-racialism, and human dignity are observed by all.

"Cabinet condemns unreservedly the recent harassment of a young woman by taxi drivers in Johannesburg for wearing a mini-skirt. Such an attack represents the most backward and the worst form of gender-based abuse and deserves the condemnation by all South Africans. Government calls on all men, and taxi drivers in particular, to stop harassing women and to distance themselves from any sexist and disrespectful behaviour against our mothers and daughters.

"The meeting also condemned the use of the 'Kaffir' word by a senior soccer official at a press conference recently. We should take care not to use derogatory words that were used to demean black persons in this country. Words such as 'Kaffir', 'coolie', 'Boesman', 'hotnot' and many others have negative connotations and remain offensive as they were used to degrade, undermine and strip South Africans of their humanity and dignity.

"The only good that must come out of these unfortunate incidents is that South Africans, irrespective of race, gender, religion, colour, or creed, must openly confront the scourge of racism, sexism and other undemocratic practices that continue to surface from time to time. All institutions must develop diversity programmes aimed at training and educating both young and old about the country's history and the reasons why the principles of non-racialism, non-sexism, discrimination had to be enshrined in our constitution.

"Whilst these diversity management programmes are important, those who engage in activities that undermine the constitutional rights of others must face the full might of the law. The public, particularly the victims of abuses, are encouraged to fully utilise institutions that were created by the Constitution such as the Courts, the Human Rights Commission, the Gender Commission and others, to enforce their rights. The transgressors must know that there will be legal consequences for undermining the constitution and trudging the rights of others."

We owe it to the generations of South Africans who will follow to remind each other that what defines us as a nation is our unique statement of a nation that values its non-racial, non-sexist and united democratic ethos.

Stop racism now!

CRISIS IN GAZA

Stop the collective punishment of the Palestinian people

The Israeli military attacks that have killed over 125 people in the Palestinian territory of Gaza over the last week are an outrage and should be condemned as war crimes. Most of the dead and injured are civilians, including women and children.

The collective punishment of the Palestinian people, long a practice of the Israeli

government, is an unacceptable and inhuman response to a situation that calls for political solutions. It is a wholly disproportionate response to the rockets fired from Gaza into Israel, actions which themselves should be condemned. The Israeli offensive has only deepened the severe humanitarian crisis in which the people of the occupied Palestinian territories find themselves, now in a permanent state of siege, subjected to constant bombardment by the most powerful military machine in the region.

This week a number of humanitarian agencies said the situation in the Gaza Strip was the worst in 40 years, and called for an end to Israel's punishing blockade of Gaza. In a joint report, they said 80% of the territory's 1.5 million people depended on food aid and 40% are unemployed. Because spare parts cannot be imported, hospitals cannot keep lifesaving equipment working, while the virtual collapse of key infrastructure is causing up to 50 million tons of sewage to be dumped into the Mediterranean Sea every day, they said.

Earlier in the week, South Africa was one of the countries supporting a resolution urging the UN Security Council to take a strong stand on this matter. The draft resolution:

- \* strongly condemned the killing of innocent civilians;
- \* called for the immediate cessation of all acts of violence, including military incursions and rocket attacks;
- \* called on Israel to abide by its obligations under international law, including international humanitarian law and human rights;
- \* called on Israel to immediately open Gaza's border crossings and allow the delivery of humanitarian aid;
- \* called on the international community to continue providing humanitarian assistance to the Palestinian people.

While the Security Council could not reach agreement on this issue, the UN Human Rights Council condemned Israel's military assault on Gaza while also urging an end to rocket attacks which killed Israeli civilians. The 47-member council approved the motion calling for "the immediate cessation of all Israeli military attacks throughout the occupied Palestinian territory" by 33 votes to 1, with 13 abstentions.

Addressing a meeting of the UN Security Council on 1 March, Palestine's permanent observer, Riyad Mansour, said:

"In deliberate and flagrant breach of article 33 of the Fourth Geneva Convention relative to the Protection of Civilians in Time of War, Israel continues to collectively punish the Palestinian civilian population in the Gaza Strip by means of the sealing and closure of the territory and the obstruction of the movement of persons and goods, including humanitarian access, as well as by means of military reprisals against persons and property and by acts of terror and intimidation. Such actions are clearly prohibited by international law and are being committed by the occupying Power on a scale and scope amounting to war crimes. The humanitarian calamity in the Gaza Strip continues to deepen as a result, and the carnage and destruction are perpetuating a vicious and bloody cycle of violence that threatens to completely destabilize the situation and derail the fragile peace process."

Addressing the same meeting, UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon said: "I condemn Palestinian rocket attacks and call for the immediate cessation of such acts of terrorism, which serve no purpose, endanger Israeli civilians and bring misery to the Palestinian people. I call for an end to these attacks."

"While recognising Israel's right to defend itself, I condemn the disproportionate and excessive use of force that has killed and injured so many civilians, including children. I call on Israel to cease such attacks. Israel must fully comply with international humanitarian law and exercise the utmost restraint. Incidents in which civilians have been killed or injured must be investigated and accountability must be ensured.

"I am deeply concerned at the possibility of the violence escalating, and have offered our strong support for all efforts to bring about an end to the violence and a period of calm. I call on all parties to step back from the brink of even deeper and more deadly clashes.

"I am also extremely concerned at the impact of these developments on the negotiation process. I call on all members of the international community, important stakeholders and Security Council members to exercise their influence on the parties to stop the violence and to allow humanitarian relief. All parties should rededicate their commitment to the peace process."

At a time when all efforts should be focused on finding a negotiated settlement to this protracted conflict, the Israeli government has chosen the route of a military escalation. At the same time, it continues to pursue its programme of seizing Palestinian territory for building new Israeli settlements, deliberately diminishing the prospects for a future Palestinian state that is cohesive and viable.

The ANC this week called on the Israeli government to "halt the deadly military assaults on the people of Gaza" and respect international humanitarian law.

"We call on the people of Israel and the people of Palestine to cease hostilities and to resume meaningful dialogue towards a just and lasting peace," it said.

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