

An Anti-Apartheid Activist Speaks on Violence

Violence affects the lives and close relations of activists in the national liberation movement daily. *Critical Health* spoke to an ANC activist in Alexandra township about her and her family's experience. What follows is a story of survival.

The severest experience of violence I had was in detention. I was detained for two and a half years - the first eight months was solitary confinement at Jeppe and thereafter, Johannesburg Prison. At Johannesburg Prison, I spent the first two months in a communal cell. I was then removed to a single cell, spending the rest of my time there in solitary. I was given absolutely nothing to read and I had nobody to speak to.

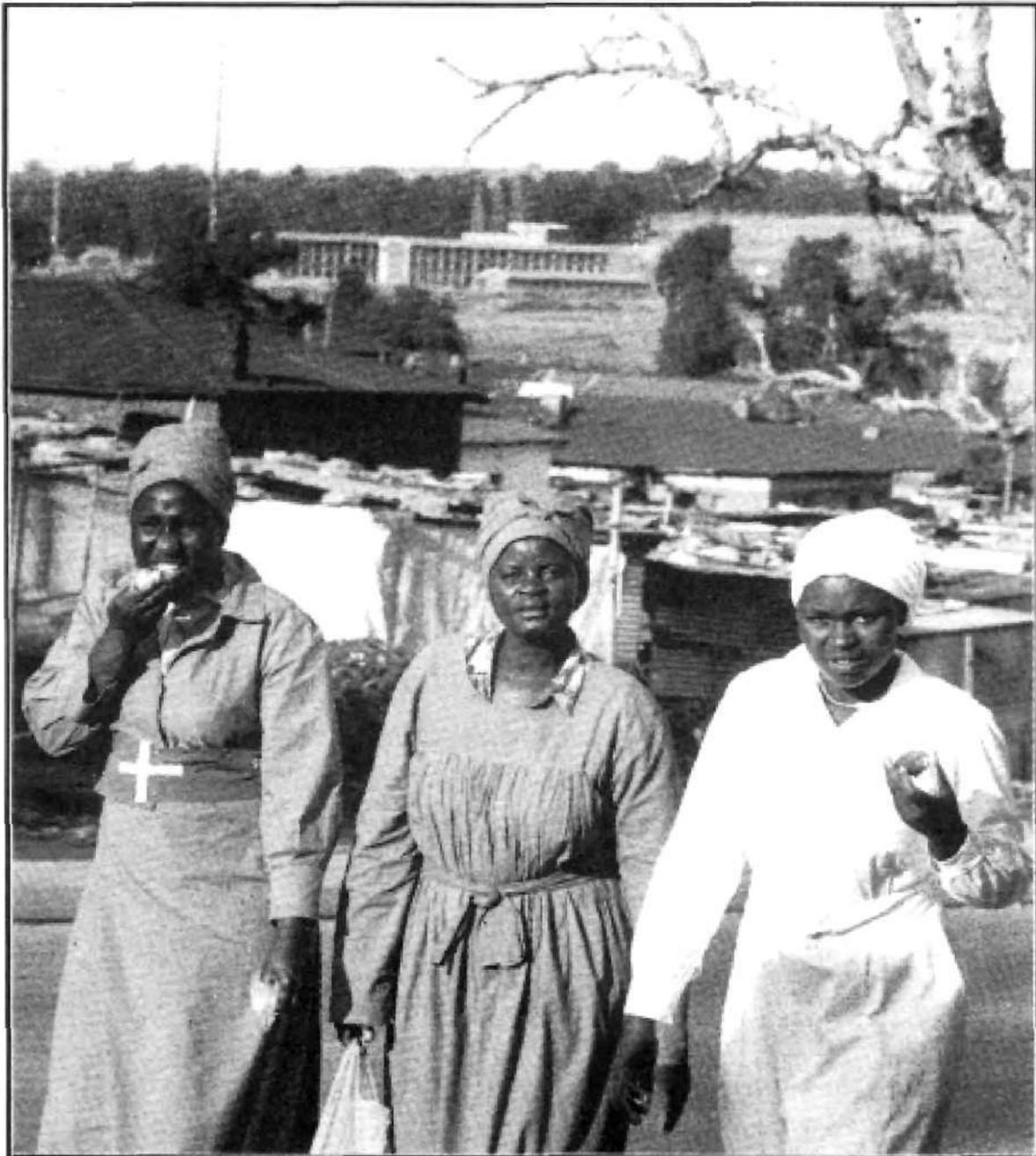
In the first days at Johannesburg Prison, their efforts at interrogating me were backed by threats and abuse. However, I matched their aggression with aggression, and sometimes wardens or police officers would leave my cell with minor injuries. By this means I was able to gain more respect from them, and they never succeeded in weakening my spirit.

Fears of the Child

At the time of my detention I had a five year old son who stayed with my mother in Meadowlands. When I was released from detention he remained in her care. As the violence escalated in the Transvaal and attacks on ANC activists increased he started having nightmares. He would wake up screaming every night. When he was asked to talk about his dreams he would remain silent. Eventually, through the help of some progressive medical people, we secured some therapy sessions at Hillbrow Children's Hospital for him. It took them a month to engage him in speaking openly about his fears. He said that he had dreamed that Inkatha people were attacking his mother and that he was worried they might kill her. The therapists suggested that he stay with me. To some extent this has helped. He seems more secure, because he sees me more often than he did before.

And the Violence Continues ...

The violence continues, however, and the root of my child's fears have not been addressed. Between November 1991 and September this year, about five people on



Although violence is endemic, people have to live their lives the best way they can. *Photo: Market Theatre Photo Workshop*

our branch executive have been killed. We buried one of them recently. He was killed on his way home from an annual general meeting of our organisation. I have had death threats and have been notified by some of my comrades that I was on an Inkatha hit list.

My child still shows signs of extreme fear. He wants to be with me wherever I go, and he always phones me at work to check if I am in. If I'm not in at the office he gets very worried and upset. At one point, he would leave school early and come to my workplace. His school work has been affected, although there has been a marked improvement since therapy. Now the problem really is his relation to his peers. His teachers tell me that he is often excessively impatient with the children he plays with and tends to be aggressive.

The Family: Confronting the Fear

The violence has affected other members of my family in different ways. I should tell you about my younger sisters who lived with my mother in Meadowlands at the time the trouble started. This area was invaded by Inkatha a year ago and has become their political stronghold. Other people in the area, ordinary citizens without active political involvement began to shun my family. They stopped their kids from playing with my sisters because they saw my family to have direct association with the ANC.

For the sake of their safety, my family have moved to Diepkloof, but these girls, once jovial and friendly in their childhood, have become reserved teenagers lacking trust and confidence to make new friends. They are used to staying indoors with my mother. My mother, once a quiet and charming women, has also been changed by the violence. She speaks loudly and is a very forthright person nowadays. Perhaps that is her strength.

The house she stayed at in Meadowlands was a converted hostel near a veld, which she visited whenever a corpse was reported there. She would want to see these corpses to assure herself that it wasn't mine or my brother's. Apart from these corpses she also witnessed horrific scenes of people burnt alive in their homes and of people evicted from their homes by the invaders.

On one occasion, I went to visit her at Meadowlands. I was followed by a group of men whom my mother recognised as people from the hostel. They were very aggressive. They said they knew that I was an ANC person and charged that I had no right to be in the area. My mother showed no fear of them. She confronted them boldly in a war of words, despite my efforts to neutralise the situation. I didn't stay for very long for fear that they might attack us later. They never returned to intimidate her since then.

Despite the threat of death against me, I do not fear for my own safety. I worry, in the event that I were killed, about my child's future - about who would take care of him. I am also the sole breadwinner in my family. I fear that they would not forgive me if I were killed for my political activity. I would want them to appreciate that if I were killed that it was for a good cause.

Critical Health