

Detentions - developments during 1988/9

During 1988 new strategies were employed by both the state and by the detainees themselves, which set the scene for the dramatic events of early 1989, where the initiative to end detention without trial was taken from inside the detention cells. Detentions have been used in South Africa as a tool to suppress all forms of organised resistance. The main thrust of detentions was felt in the Pietermaritzburg area, and also in the school-going, or potentially school-going, youth and civic organisations in the PWV area. However, the year will be remembered mainly for the actions of the detainees themselves and the means they employed for publicising their circumstances.



The youth of South Africa were detained in large numbers over the past few years

What the statistics show

The year saw an overall decrease in the number of detentions but the detainee population experienced an increase in average time served. Many of the new detentions in 1988 were a state response to particular events. The most notable of these was the municipal elections in October, which prompted a surge of detentions in various parts of the country, mainly in the Transvaal and the Western Cape. Nelson Mandela's birthday was a national occasion which also triggered a number of detentions amongst organisers of the celebrations. An anti-apartheid conference organised for September, but banned, also resulted in many detentions.

Table 1 below has been compiled from the records of the Human Rights Commission. The collection of this information is made extremely difficult by the secrecy surrounding detentions and by the way in which the Minister of Law and Order, Minister Vlok, chooses to present lists of detainees to parliament. Only the names of those who have been in detention for over 30 days are given. No additional information, other than names of those detained, is issued. As in the previous year, detentions were heaviest in the Transvaal and Natal. New detentions were markedly lower in the Eastern Cape and Border areas, where organisations in the democratic movement had already suffered badly from repression. This resulted in less resistance from the community. However, amongst the detainee population are many community leaders from these places who were detained in 1986 and who spent yet another long year behind bars. Some United Democratic Front (UDF) activists spent their third Christmas in detention.

	PWV	TVL	Natal	OFS	N. Cape	E. Cape	W. Cape	Unknown	Total
Scholars/students/teachers	445	5	30	5	1	25	14	3	528
Trade unionists/workers	83	4	18	1	-	12	11	3	132
Community/political	287	16	20	4	6	56	47	3	439
Others	21	3	.	-	-	4	9	-	37
Unknown	557	61	935	35	-	264	106	613	2571
Total	1393	89	1003	47	7	361	187	622	3707

Table 1: category of detentions under the state of emergency by area, Jan 1988 - Dec 1988 (These detentions do not include those under the Internal Security Act)

Detentions from the Pietermaritzburg area account for nearly one third of the total number. It is probable that many of the detainees in the category "Unknown" are also from Natal. In contrast with what happened in other regions, these detentions were *mainly for short periods.*



Concern for her 2 sons in detention — 70 000 people have been detained since the 1960s

In the Transvaal, the two largest categories of detainees were students and community workers, reflecting the controversial issues of the year. The education crisis remains unresolved and many SOSCO (Soweto Students Congress) members are amongst those still in detention. Similarly, the continuing rent boycott has accounted for large numbers of detainees categorised as political and community workers, which includes members of street committees and civic associations.

Releases, hunger strikes and escapes

Overall, the picture of detentions in 1988 is dominated by the releases during that year and during the first months of 1989, bringing the number of detainees to the lowest figure since the declaration of the emergency of 1985. The year 1988 started with the strategic gesture of releasing fourteen detainees, allegedly at the request of the late



In 1988 eighteen popular organisations were restricted as part of a general intensification of state repression

Bavarian Prime Minister, Mr. Strauss, who was visiting the country at the time. The action was much paraded by the state as a demonstration of its moderation, but sceptically regarded by many as a demonstration of the arbitrary nature of detention without trial.

On 24 February 1988, heavy restriction orders were served on 18 organisations. This was accompanied by the severe restriction of ten prominent UDF figures and three journalists and the release from detention of four UDF leaders who were also placed under restriction orders. These restrictions had a severe effect on these organisations with the exception of the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) which was only allowed to continue with work that was strictly labour-related. It is clear that the state has found this strategy effective.

Detainees started devising new ways of applying pressure on the state for their release. The first was escaping from custody and taking refuge in foreign consulates and embassies amidst international publicity and threatening to damage diplomatic relationships. The first of these escapers were Murphy Morobe, Valli Moosa and Vusi Khanyile (the "Kine 3"), all long-term detainees and prominent leaders. They spent thirty-seven days in the United States consulate in Johannesburg. They left with assurances from the Minister of Law and Order that they would not be re-detained and would not be restricted. This assurance has been honoured - but with the virtual



The "Kine 3" escaped detention and took refuge in the U.S. consulate to highlight their plight

banning of the organisations to which they belong, namely the UDF and the NECC (National Education Crisis Committee), the state is able to give these assurances in relative comfort.

The second initiative taken by detainees was that of hunger strikes. Hunger strikes featured regularly during the year with seventeen different hunger strikes being undertaken by at least five hundred detainees. These occurred in twelve different prisons and police stations throughout the country. The first dramatic case was that of Tozamile Taai, a SARHWU member held under Section 29, a man of forty-four and suffering from diabetes. After thirty-three days he was charged by a court convened at his hospital bedside. A few days later the charges were dropped and he was released. This was a forerunner of the concerted hunger strike of 1989 which resulted in the release of many detainees who feared indefinite detention. However, most of the recently released detainees were placed under severe restrictions. Thus, being imprisoned in their own homes has to some extent replaced detention without trial as a major tactic of repression. The strategy of imposing restrictions on both organisations and individuals in place of widespread detentions has also acted to diffuse the emotive issue around detentions whereby sympathy for detainees had been effectively used to mobilise opposition both locally and internationally.