

Health and removals: the case of Oukasie

What “disestablishment” means for Oukasie

On 17 October 1986 the residents of Oukasie (90 km north/west of Johannesburg) woke up to find that their 55 year old, 12 000 strong township no longer legally existed. It had been “disestablished”. A special government gazette had been issued in terms of section 37 (2) of the Black Communities Act, 1984 (as amended). This section provides that the Minister of Constitutional Development and Planning may disestablish an area “whenever it appears to him that the conditions under which people are living in a development area ... are such that unless such development area ... is altered or disestablished, the health or safety of the public generally or of any group of persons may be endangered”.

The implication of the disestablishment for Oukasie residents was that the land that had formally been reserved for black occupation was no longer. The residents had overnight become squatters in their own township.



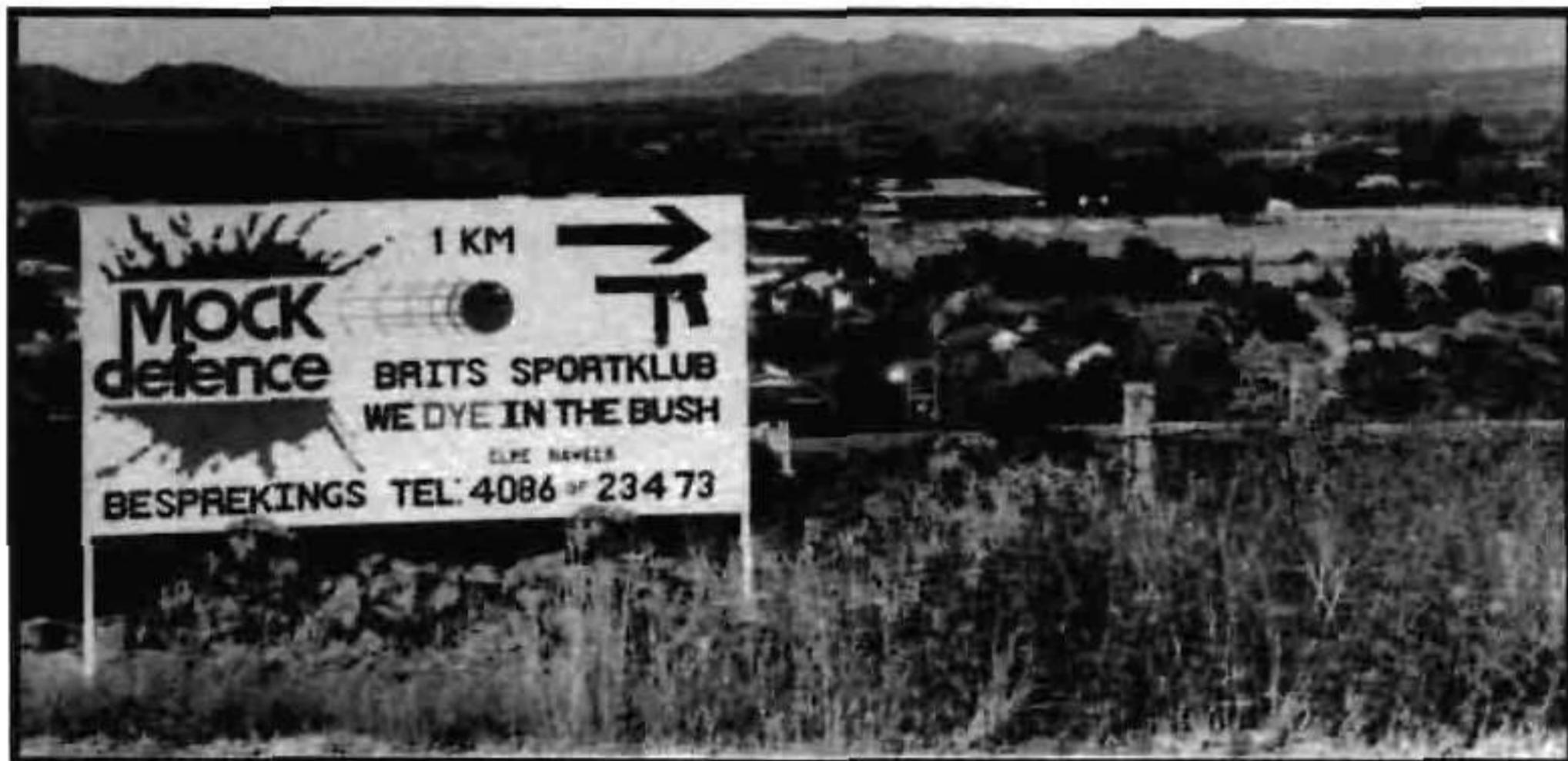
"Lethlabile? We are not going there." - Residents of Oukasie, a well established community, were told that for humanitarian reasons, they were to be removed to the resettlement town of Lethlabile!

The then Minister of Constitutional Development and Planning, Mr Chris Heunis, released a press statement arguing that the disestablishment was an humane act. The residents according to the Minister had to be moved to the resettlement town, Lethlabile, 25 kilometres north on the borders of Bophuthatswana because after "several years of negotiation with the former community council of the township ... it had been decided that the hygienic conditions there and the astronomical costs involved in upgrading the town did not make its continued use a viable proposition".

Health conditions were thus presented as a primary factor motivating and legitimating the Oukasie removal. The question that emerges, and the one that this article will focus on, is the extent to which the health conditions were and are a legitimate pretext for the removal and ultimate destruction of Oukasie. In order to answer this question, it is necessary to first give a brief history of the Oukasie removal.

Health conditions as a pretext for removal?

The removal was first mooted in the 1950s and then put on ice until the mid-1960s. In the early seventies the removal plan was partially realised when approximately 200 families were moved to Mothutlung, about 20 kilometres north east of Brits, in Bophuthatswana. The local Brits paper captured the real reason for this removal with a front page story that read: "Die Brits lokasie wat 'n seeroog was vir Brits en langs een van ons mooi woonbuurtes gelee is, sal eersdaags nie meer ons dorp ontsier nie" (Brits Pos, 10 April 1970). (The Brits location, which was an eyesore for Brits and situated next to one of our pretty suburbs, will soon no longer spoil our town.)



The white residents of Brits believed that the township of Oukasie spoil their suburbs.



Residents pray for a stay of the removal at an Oukasie church service.

The plan to remove the whole of Oukasie was again dropped, but was revived with a great deal of vigour by the local city council in the mid-seventies. In 1976 the campaign by the local council to remove Oukasie took a significant step forward when the Department of Bantu Administration and Development bought 400 hectares of the farm Nuutgedacht (now called Lethlabile) for the specific purpose of providing an alternative site for Oukasie residents.

The rationale behind this planned removal had nothing to do with improving the health of Oukasie residents, but rather with satisfying the racist desires of the local town council to have the black residents of Brits as far away as was feasible. This is starkly illustrated by every annual report of the mayor from 1976 up until 1983. Under a section headed "Bantus" or "Swartmense", depending on the year, the annual report emphasised that "Die Raad het gedurende die jaar sy pogings volgehou om die Brits Swartwoongebied wat 'n belemmering inhou vir die ontwikkeling van Blanke woongebiede to laat verskuif" (Mayor's Annual Report, Brits, 1981-1982). (The Council saw the black township as an obstacle to the development of the white areas and kept up their attempts, throughout the year, to remove it.)

The desire of white Brits residents to remove Oukasie was intensified by the changing pattern of the area in the seventies. In the late sixties the area was declared a decentralisation point and in line with the increased employment opportunities there was a substantial influx of black and white residents into the Brits area. A new middle class white suburb, Elandsrand, was built next door to Oukasie. There is no doubt that Elandsrand residents would like to witness the demise of Oukasie. The whites of Brits



Oukasie residents sign affidavits protesting the removal and authorising the community's Brits Action Committee to represent them legally in any removal proceedings.

would go up as transport would be much more expensive (many residents walk the two kilometres to the town centre) and the cost of food is almost certainly a lot higher in Lethlabile. Finally, those residents with corrugated iron houses, the majority of remaining residents, receive no compensation for their homes when they move. They would have to rebuild their homes in Lethlabile and this could be a costly exercise. Another finding was that residents had built up a very strong attachment to the area, despite the lack of an infrastructure. Oukasie was "home". A move to Lethlabile was perceived as a profound and totally unacceptable uprooting and dislocation which could lead to significant psychological stress.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it is clear that the familiar justification used by the state for moving and thereby destroying communities, ie. hygienic conditions, is very suspect and should be treated as such. One response is to carry out well conducted surveys that can be used to scientifically challenge the government's propaganda and help raise awareness of the situation so as to increase the power of resistance.

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