

In the centre of the conflict in Crossroads, which has claimed scores of lives this year, is Depouch "Whitey" Elles. He has been struggling against the headman system in Crossroads for a long time and has survived several assassination attempts. His mother and nephew were killed in March this year by masked gunmen who burst into her house.

Depouch Elles fights on. As the organiser of the ANC Bantubakhe/Unathi branch he finds himself locked in a bitter struggle with controversial squatter leader Jeffrey Nongwe. He spoke to SOBANTU XAYIYA.



DEPOUCH ELLES: He doesn't believe Nongwe has repented.

Fear and loathing in Crossroads

Depouch, can you tell us about the Crossroads violence?

It is not the first time that we are visited by violence. You must remember that in this place, from its inception when the notorious pass laws were still enforced, people experienced violence directly from the state.

Again, in 1983 a fight erupted between Oliver Memani and Johnson Ngxobongwana (former mayor of Crossroads) over the division of the spoils. Memani was defeated and sought refuge at KTC squatter camp together with his followers.

At this time Ngxobongwana was a very important member of the Western Cape Civic Association. In fact he was its chairperson. What made him popular was that he was vocal against the forced removals introduced by the Cape Provincial Administration. He led the *asiyapho* ("we are not going to Khayelitsha") struggles.

I still remember many people who died from running battles between the police and the youth under the banner of the Cape Youth Congress. At New Crossroads people were engaged in a rent boycott. Ngxobongwana spearheaded this boycott. Because residents here had been squatters, the idea of paying exorbitant service charges was alien to them.

Ngxobongwana was later arrested for inciting the public. His lawyers were organised by the Civic and UDF (United Democratic Front). However, to the people's

surprise, he turned down this offer. He wanted to organise his own legal council.

He asked each house at New Crossroads to contribute R10 to finance his legal costs. Indunas were to collect this money on his behalf, as each section was controlled by an induna.

Why did Ngxobongwana reject the help of the civic and UDF?

There are several factors, but I will cite only one: the two organisations functioned on a democratic basis and through these organisations people, particularly the youth, were gradually learning the fundamentals of democracy – to be in control of their own lives. Such a perception was endangering the autocratic induna system.

This came out into the open when the people of New Crossroads wanted to elect a committee which was going to function independently from KwaNoxolo (Ngxobongwana's headquarters at Crossroads). But Ngxobongwana refused. He wanted his self-appointed committee to continue representing the people.

As a result the people of New Crossroads, assisted by KTC residents (who had tasted Ngxobongwana's wrath during his fight against Memani), violently disbanded Ngxobongwana's committee, evicting all its members from the area.

Ngxobongwana then sent reinforcements to deal with those who were opposed to him.

You know the famous 1985-86 story of the faction fight between the so-called "conservative fathers" (later called *witdoeke*, because they wore white cloths tied around their heads or arms) and the youth of New Crossroads (*comrades*). However, to us, the so-called fathers were vigilantes who wanted to impose an undemocratic tribal system in an urban set-up.

They were defeated after a cluster of toy-toting youth threw a hand-grenade at them. Most of them fled to Crossroads and Site C (a squatter settlement that is now part of Khayelitsha).

New Crossroads became independent and became a stronghold of progressive structures, including youth and women's organisations. Ngxobongwana continued with his controversial activities, extracting money from Crossroads residents. Again he faced severe challenges from the youth (and women) in this area.

He banned the Cape Youth Congress permanently from Crossroads. Most of the youth fled to the outlying satellite camps of Portland Cement, Nyanga Bush and Nyanga Extension. These were controlled by three former headmen, Christopher Toise, Melford Yamile and Siphike, who had revolted against Ngxobongwana's autocratic rule.

Ngxobongwana threatened to attack the three satellite camps if they continued harbouring *amaqabane* (*comrades*). He vowed to get rid of *amaqabane* at Crossroads. In this

endeavour he aligned himself with Mali Hoza of Site C.

The SADF and the police continued harassing the people of Nyanga Bush and Portland Cement. Ngxobongwana launched night attacks against the three satellite camps but these were continuously foiled by the fire-power of the comrades.

This resulted in a sort of a cycle. During the day you had the SADF/police guys sealing off the whole area and searching for arms – in other words, disarming the people; at night we were attacked.

But the comrades' fire-power continued embarrassing them. We heard that some of the vigilantes were beginning to defy their masters, as the SADF/police were failing to disarm the comrades.

To avert a disastrous situation they decided to attack during the day – with an SADF/police helicopter hovering above to identify those armed comrades frustrating their course. The rest of the story you know – the three satellite camps were razed.

Crossroads became a stronghold of the Joint Management structures and Ngxobongwana recruited former vigilantes to be kitskonstabels (instant constables). Later he was appointed mayor of Crossroads.

As a gesture of congratulation for his ser-

vices, Crossroads was paid a visit by then State President PW Botha, Defence Minister Magnus Malan and Law and Order Minister Adriaan Vlok. During this visit, a Crossroads resident was arrested for possession of a limpet mine. Ngxobongwana ordered his house demolished.

Where does Jeffrey Nongwe feature in this?

Each and every time a faction fight broke out, Ngxobongwana fled to Ciskei, and the actual fight was conducted by Jeffrey Nongwe, Sam Ndima and Prince Gobingca (presently serving a jail term in Transkei for attempting to overthrow the military government of General Bantu Holomisa).

Because Nongwe commanded huge vigilante forces during the faction fighting, he became more ambitious and started accusing Ngxobongwana of embezzling funds. He accused him of selling land reserved for Crossroads residents to the banks.

Nongwe claimed that he had a huge following and that he was not involved in Ngxobongwana's corruption. He also accused him of not fulfilling his promise to build houses for those people who moved from Section Four to Boystown.

He ordered his followers not to occupy the

white houses constructed by Ngxobongwana. However, a certain section from Boystown defied him and occupied them. Nongwe then issued an order that these houses should be demolished. He said that he was going to build people proper houses where pensioners would pay rent of 75 cents and those employed five rand.

Did he really promise them that?

The people demolished and burned most of the houses. By then Nongwe was chairperson of both the ANC and the Western Cape Squatters' Association (Wecusa). Ngxobongwana had fled the area.

Nongwe continued attacking the white houses, saying that they were occupied by non-Crossroads residents. He also swore to the residents that, should he fail to fulfil his promise of building them houses, they must necklace him.

What was the reaction of the political organisations to these developments? Surely Nongwe's activities were contradicting democratic principles?

The organisations were still reading and assessing the political developments, since

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Not my fault, says Nongwe

By SOBANTU XAYIYA

SQUATTER leader Jeffrey Nongwe denies that he is responsible for any wrongdoing and places the blame for violence at Crossroads on people who hold influential positions within the local and regional structures of political organisations. Nongwe says they "have no interest in resolving this conflict".

Interviewed at his Crossroads home, Nongwe called on all the community organisations affected by the violence to get together to "devise the correct strategy" for ending violence in the area.

"The only thing that can help us is to stop labelling each other and get into the serious business of finding the correct solutions to this problem," he said. "For those forces we have all been fighting against are now laughing at us, and they are exploiting these divisions."

Nongwe said he wanted the African National Congress national office to act as peace broker, but expressed frustration that four faxes requesting their intervention in the Crossroads conflict had gone unanswered.

Asked whether, in the light of all the allegations made against him, he still regarded himself as an ANC member, Nongwe said: "I never resigned from the ANC. After all, I'm still the chairperson of the Crossroads branch. It is the people labelling us who paint a distorted picture of our branch."



JEFFREY NONGWE: We must stop labelling each other.

Asked about the difficulty of getting voter education programmes off the ground in the Crossroads area, given the high level of violence, Nongwe said he was concerned, and that was why he had sent four faxes to the ANC national office.

"The atmosphere at the moment is heavily loaded with suspicions. The people of the nearby Nyanga township are afraid to come here, and the people of Crossroads are afraid to go there.

"However, I'm planning to convene a meeting of all the squatters to present some peace initiative proposals. Thereafter we will approach the ANC to convene a meeting of all the local organisations, together with the squatters, to deliberate on this issue. It is only after we've got rid of these suspicions that voter education programmes can be effectively implemented."

Pressed on whether he had any other problems with getting voter education programmes off the ground in the area, Nongwe said: "Not at all, they can come any time and start initiating their programmes."

Seizing the moment

LOCAL political scientist Andre du Toit told the seminar that it was important that the process of transition in South Africa be seen in context, and as a process of action and reaction – rather than in terms of a simplistic set of positive or negative factors.

Du Toit, who teaches political science at the University of Cape Town, said that historical and political change took place in a more complex manner than simply as the result of a number of negative or positive elements.

While agreeing that grim social and economic realities could not be wished away, he said that they could also not be dealt with by identifying a longer list of positive factors at play in society. Instead, Du Toit suggested that two pointers be considered when viewing the process of transition in society: the historical context and a dialectical perspective.

For instance, very negative factors could contribute to positive interventions and developments, and vice versa. Very serious political conflict could have the effect of galvanising people into doing something to address it. Similarly, if people believed that all was going well and disengaged from involvement in monitoring or pressuring for change, a situation that looked promising could deteriorate rapidly.

As to historical context, it was important to remember that real changes had occurred since February 1990. "We must take seriously the fact that there has been a change away from the polarised 'total onslaught' politics of the 1980s, towards negotiation. There has also been substantial liberation in the society, allowing political groups to operate freely,"

already had some of the essential elements of civil society – trade unions, voluntary organisations and certain judicial traditions.

Socio-economic redistribution was also essential to help address the issue of political violence. Youth development programmes which would help absorb and reabsorb the "lost generation" would serve to give youth a sense of hope.

Priorities would need to be set and certain trade-offs might be unavoidable. For example, the rural areas might have to suffer from less attention because the townships were boiling.

Diamond said that any further delay in the process of transition would be "very, very

Du Toit said.

"We are living in an historical moment. Even bearing in mind the long list of negative factors, there is a window of opportunity which could be utilised if the necessary political will is there."

He said South Africans could not sit back and rely on positive factors to pull the country through the transition. "Most crucial is the need for political will and leadership. However, this is not apparent, especially regarding the violence – politicians are conniving with it and using it to suit political agendas."

Du Toit said that if people woke up to understand the full reality of the "ghastly things" happening in the country, and if they knew that things could get worse if nothing was done, then there was still the chance of turning the situation around.

"There is a fine balance between self-fulfilling prophecies based on the bleak scenarios that can be identified and described around us, and the possibility that, if we spell out the realities of the situation in all their grimness, and if there is real political leadership, then we can still do something about it."

Another participant in the seminar, Stellenbosch philosopher Johan Degenaar, said it was important to distinguish between pessimism, optimism and hope.

He said that where people took seriously what was happening and felt pessimistic, it was likely that they would feel themselves to be victims of the situation and powerless.

Equally worrying were the dangers of false optimism – when people did not take the harsh realities of the situation seriously enough and hoped for utopia.

The alternative, said Degenaar, was an understanding of hope as "creative expectation". In this context, people knew and understood the realities of the situation, but continued to do something to influence the process.

dangerous", adding that "until there is a true transitional government, you will not be able to get a grip on the problems". High priorities should be the reorganisation of the security forces and a crack-down, using the full force of the law, on criminal behaviour.

It might now be a truism that each grouping within South Africa needed a sense of having a stake in the system, but there would be "deep trouble" in the country if it looked as if one group would take all.

Diamond said South Africa had already travelled an enormous way down the road towards democracy, and foreigners visiting the country were struck by the "tremendous" human resources of this society.

Fear and loathing

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for so long Crossroads had been controlled by conservative elements. Crossroads is a minefield: one has to be careful when dealing with it, especially when the witdoek vigilante war is still vivid in most people's minds.

After all, we didn't think Nongwe would go to such extremes. We were in the same ANC branch and we thought his witdoek attitude would gradually be discarded as he encountered democratic practice within the organisation.

We soon discovered that he was using the very same structure to perpetuate the headman system. Another thing we noticed was that when he assumed power, Nongwe never lifted the banishment of youth and women's organisations. In actual fact he refused to allow them to be launched in this area.

So we from the Bantubakhe/Unathi area decided to launch our own branch, and together with other comrades we started organising people. Many people fled from Nongwe and came to join us. The people started questioning Nongwe's activities. For instance, they questioned his removal of people from Section One and Two to Lower Crossroads, for the purpose of upgrading the areas, without consultation.

Nongwe also interfered with the affairs of the local Mandela High School, challenging the decision to name a Crossroads school after Nelson Mandela. He wanted the school to be named after him, as he was the recognised leader of Crossroads.

A South African Communist Party branch was launched in Crossroads. Many people joined as it was vocal in criticising the squatter leader's autocratic rule. The houses of all SACP members in Crossroads were burned, and Nongwe continued with his campaign of forced removals.

Why does Nongwe keep on mentioning you as the source of all the problems at Crossroads?

It's because I'm one of the people who organised resistance against him. Moreover I never swallowed his rubbish that he has repented. After killing and displacing so many families, surely he cannot expect us to embrace him?

Many people would disagree with you, given that presently the country is in a healing process of reconciliation. Do you still think your decision to keep Nongwe at arm's length was correct?

Yes, we were absolutely correct. You can see for yourself what Nongwe turned out to be – a tyrant.