

## 2. MEWA RAMGOBIN

Two months ago it was Fatima Meer, this time it is Mewa Ramgobin — banned for a further five years. The only difference is that the Ramgobin ban is even more onerous than the Meer ban, and that Mewa is starting on his fourth stint, while Fatima was starting on her third.

The reason the Minister of Justice gives for renewing Mewa Ramgobin's ban is, it seems, that he "is satisfied" that he "was engaged in activities which endanger or are calculated to endanger public order in South Africa". While he was banned? The kindest thing one can say about the Minister is that he is talking rubbish.

Mewa Ramgobin to the best of our knowledge, and we know him a good deal better than the Minister ever will, has never wanted to endanger public order in South Africa. What he has wanted to do is to bring an end to the apartheid order in South Africa. That is something quite different, and in our view, and that of most other people who have had experience of it, highly desirable. Whatever the Minister of Justice may have been led to believe, Mewa Ramgobin does not advocate

violence. It would be a strange thing if he did, as a member of Manilal Gandhi's family. So why has the Minister banned him again? Obviously because the local members of the Security Police have advised him to do so. And why should they give such advice? We think that it is because, in spite of all the terrible restrictions they have placed upon him, he won't give in. He continues to believe in a non-racial South Africa with equal rights and opportunities for everyone and no doubt tells them so when they come round pestering him. The Security Police don't like that.

Of course the Minister and the Security Police have a problem. If they unban Mewa he'll start saying and doing the things he believes in. And if they ban him, which they have decided to do, he will handle his ban in such a way that he will inspire others to say and do the things he believes in.

One thing is certain. In the contest between what the Minister advocates and what Mewa advocates, in the end only Mewa can win. We hope this knowledge will sustain him in the five long years ahead. □

## DURBAN HOUSING CRISIS II

by Garth Seneque

A previous article in REALITY discussed the housing crisis in Durban.<sup>1</sup> It referred to the growing resistance on the part of the residents, to the City Council's and the Government's policies and actions in the public housing schemes. This article is an attempt to provide some background for an understanding of this resistance.

A publication issued by the Durban Housing Action Committee — an umbrella co-ordinating committee of community organisations — noted: "Although the struggle against high rentals reached its most intense phase in 1980, the Phoenix, Newlands East and Sydenham Heights communities have been protesting against high rentals from the very inception of these housing schemes. The responses, if any, from the Community Development and the Durban City Council to these protests have always been meaningless and indicate their non-co-operation and uncaring attitude to problems faced by the Black community."<sup>2</sup>

What are these problems? A few statistics provide an insight. These are taken from a survey conducted in Phoenix in September last year.<sup>3</sup>

	Above HSL	Below HSL
Phoenix	55,6%	44,4%
Newlands East	52,5%	47,5%

The Household Subsistence Level (HSL) is an index which has replaced the Poverty Datum Line (PDL). It takes into account only the very basic necessities required by a family for mere subsistence. It has three components — the Primary Household Subsistence Level, rent and transport

The Primary Household Subsistence Level, in turn, is comprised of estimates of food, clothing, fuel, light, washing and cleansing components.

In October, 1980 the Household Subsistence Level for a Coloured Family in Durban was:<sup>4</sup>

P.H.S.L.	Rent	Transport	H.S.L.
160,66	32,27	13,43	206,36

To give one a better idea of the meaning of these figures, it should be noted that the food component of the Primary Household Subsistence Level was R23.61 per month for a Coloured male, 19–50 years old. It is interesting to note that when the Minister of Health, Dr. L. Munnik maintained earlier this year that White pensioners could live on R25,00 worth of food per month, the White public was shocked and angry. The outcry that followed this contention studiously ignored the fact that this was merely a component in the subsistence level. Yet the Household Subsistence Level is not achieved by nearly 50% of the residents in the Durban City Council's Housing Schemes.

However, I believe the situation to be far worse. The three components are average figures for the Durban area as a whole. The very location of Phoenix and Newlands East increases transport costs. The rentals are, on the whole, higher. The costs of the Primary Household Subsistence Level components are higher because of the serious under provision of shopping facilities. The residents are forced to pay high prices because they have to depend on mobile shops and small stores. They do not have local shopping centres with large chain stores. Should they do the bulk of their shopping in the shopping centres in White areas, they incur further transport costs.

I would therefore, roughly estimate the Household Subsistence Level for Phoenix and Newlands East communities to have been closer to R250 per month. However, the survey indicated that more than 80% of household heads in Phoenix had a monthly income of less than R250. Further if found that nearly 20% spent more than 50% of their income on rent alone.

To cope with this situation, many families have simply cut back on the consumption of items such as food. Socio-

medical surveys have found that incidents of children fainting at school because they have not eaten that day, are common. One can safely assume that such under-nourishment leads to under-achievement at school.

In order to understand the strain a family is put under when it moves to a township such as Phoenix, it is necessary to look at their situation prior to removal.

An example is New Farm, an informal settlement, which was destroyed and its residents re-settled in Phoenix. Previously they had paid R2,50 to R4,20 rental per month. A later survey indicated that 73% of New Farm residents did not want to move to Phoenix but preferred to remain in New Farm, with upgraded services and facilities.<sup>5</sup> So stable, low-income communities in low rental accommodation are uprooted and forced into high rental housing which they cannot afford.

Another example is the small community of Cato Manor. Some three hundred and fifty families have somehow managed to cling to their homes in spite of nearly twenty years of Group Areas removals. They are all under the threat of eviction and removal to Phoenix and Newlands East — despite the fact that a portion of the old Cato Manor has been re-proclaimed for Indian occupation. The majority of these residents could not afford the cost of living in Phoenix. 30% have an income of less than R150 per month and 67% an income of less than R250 per month.<sup>5</sup>

Furthermore, a recent report by the City Treasurer indicates that there are 17 500 Indian families on the waiting list for a house in the housing schemes. Yet 66% of these earned less than R250 a month. He comments, "It is accepted that the problem is really one of poverty. . ."<sup>7</sup>

Last year the Durban City Council decided to increase rentals in the housing schemes by an average 15%. It held that the increase was necessary because the Council had incurred a loss of about R1,3 million in running the housing schemes.<sup>8</sup> It was this action that led to the formation of the Durban Housing Action Committee and the rent boycott.

Rent in the housing schemes is comprised of two main components — basic rental and additional charges. The basic rental is determined by the interest and redemption charges used to repay the Department of Community Development loan for the building of the housing schemes. The Department of Community Development appears to have accepted the principle of partial subsidisation under its Circulars 9 and 10 of 1980, in which this portion of the rent is linked to the household head's income. However, as Hemson has pointed out "In fact the net effect on "basic rentals" in Durban was a decrease of 3,3%. . . while tenants in the large R150-R250 group suffered large increases."<sup>9</sup>

The 'additional charges' component is comprised of administration costs, maintenance costs, rates, etc. and goes to the Durban City Council. It steadfastly refuses to accept the idea of subsidising the low income residents. Therefore, it attempts to 'balance its books' by increasing rents as the additional charges rise. However, it is quite prepared to subsidise other less crucial areas : <sup>10</sup>

#### ABSORPTION OF DEFICITS BY DURBAN CITY COUNCIL 1978 — 1981

	78 — 79	79 — 80	Estimates 80 — 81
Museum — Art Gallery	549 060	634 680	815 910
Parks and Recreation	6 403 240	7 357 540	8 716 050

			Estimates
Ocean Beaches, Public Pools	2 760 110	3 004 900	3 719 750
Sporting Bodies	2 686 710	2 779 270	2 995 150
<b>TOTALS</b>	<b>11 850 060</b>	<b>13 776 390</b>	<b>16 246 860</b>

The Council has further subsidised the White bus transport system by many millions of rand over the years. Yet it argues that it could not absorb the R1,3 million deficit on the housing schemes. However, further investigations of the figure by the Durban Housing Action Committee indicated that it was misleading. In fact, it appears that a small group of White tenants in City Council housing have accounted for a large portion of the deficit : <sup>11</sup>

	Total	White	Indian	Coloured
1980/81 estimated deficit	1 246 620	706 700	472 120	67 800
Percentage of tenants in housing schemes		7,3%	79,1%	13,6%
Percentage of total housing deficit		56,7%	37,9%	5,4%
Number of tenants October 1980		1 123	12 196	2 093
Subsidy per tenant Oct. 1980		R629,30	R38,71	R32,39
Subsidy per tenant Jan. 1981		R541,95	R38,91	R31,52
Number of tenants January 1981		1,304	13 135	2 151

Durban Housing Action Committee, as representative of the communities of Phoenix, Newlands East, Asherville, Chatsworth, Sydenham Heights and Cato Manor puts its case quite clearly :

"The stated principle that the Council does not "subsidise" rents needs to be critically examined and balanced against the absorption by the Council of deficits incurred from other services . . . . It is clear . . . . that considerable sums of money are spent on items which can be regarded as non-essentials and luxuries in comparison to basic necessities such as housing. Furthermore, it is apparent that some of these services by their nature and location are intended for and used primarily by White voters . . . . The irresistible conclusion of all this is that the priorities of the Council are inverted and oriented towards the gratification of White wants rather than the alleviation of the urgent needs of Black communities.

We may justly ask what is the critical difference between the two. It is our consistent demand that the guiding principle determining allocation of resources should be — necessities first, luxuries last."<sup>12</sup>

Thus, it can be seen that rent is a massive cost to the majority of the low-income families re-settled under the Group Areas Act in the public housing schemes. Further, the very determination of that rent is a sensitive political issue which appears to be highly discriminatory against those who can least afford it and who have few means to fight it — the poor.

However, rental is merely one issue. Others such as the Group Areas Act, the quality of housing, the lack of community services and facilities, high transport and food costs are all crucial issues which contribute to the crisis and resistance in the communities.

There is an urgent need for the Local and National authorities to accept that the low-income group have a right to housing and community facilities at a cost which they can afford. □

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