

South Africa police violence caught on film

Barbara Slaughter
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Six Johannesburg policemen have been suspended from duty after a BBC film was broadcast that showed them beating suspects and attacking them with police dogs.

One piece of footage, screened on British and South African television, showed police officers in Brixton (Johannesburg) arresting two suspected car thieves. The men were handcuffed and forced to lie on the ground. The police officers then proceeded to kick the men in the face and set a police dog on them. One of the men had a cigarette stubbed out on his head and was then repeatedly struck with a rifle butt. Both men were later released without being charged.

In a second incident, two men who were suspected of car hijacking were seriously injured when the driver lost control of the car. They were unconscious when they were dragged out of the car and were brutally kicked and rifle butted whilst lying on the ground.

One of the men has since died. The cause of death has not yet been announced. The Independent Complaints Directorate is investigating the incident. The other man has been tried and found guilty of hijacking and received a 15-year jail sentence.

The film was shown on the BBC's *Newsnight* programme on April 19. A spokesperson for the programme told the WSWWS that a 25-year-old female trainee recorded it. The European Union intern was on a "work experience" scheme with the BBC's Johannesburg Bureau. Her assignment was to go out with the Brixton police for four weeks to make a "fly on the wall" documentary about crime and violence in South Africa. When the BBC examined the rushes they realised that rather than material about crime, they had captured graphic footage of extreme violence in the police force itself. The spokesperson said that they were not releasing the name of the young intern, because of fears of reprisals.

Martin Turner, head of the Johannesburg-based BBC Africa bureau, reported that his office had received a flood of angry telephone calls and even death threats, after South African television networks broadcast the

footage.

On April 23, eight other police officials--a white policewoman, three black policemen and four white policemen--have also been suspended. They are members of the Johannesburg flying squad, the Langlaagte dog unit and Mondeor police.

These events happened three months ago. It has only come to light because of the chance presence of the young intern. The *Newsnight* spokesperson said that the police knew that the camera was rolling and it could only indicate that such incidents were commonplace among the South African police.

Since the film was shown, Dr Frank Nyame, a Ghanaian academic has claimed that he was also the victim of police brutality. He was confronted by two policemen in Brixton and accused of being an illegal immigrant. He was taken to the police station where he was head-butted into unconsciousness. He was charged with resisting arrest and assaulting a police officer. After being held for a few hours he was released and the charges dropped. His landlord, who tried to intervene on his behalf, was arrested and then released also without charge.

The ANC government has attempted to justify the violence of the police. After the film was broadcast, a government official said that such brutality was commonplace because of the stress officers endure "in a society riddled with gun-toting criminals".

The Independent Complaints Authority (ICD), set up last April to investigate complaints against the police, says it is overwhelmed by allegations of killings carried out by law officers. The death of the man attacked by police in the *Newsnight* film is just one among many.

ICD statistics show that more than 530 people died at the hands of the police in the last nine months of 1997. The figures reveal that nearly 160 people died in custody or as a result of police action in Gauteng in the same period; 154 in Kwa-Zulu-Natal, with 20 deaths in that province in December alone. Another 58 died in the Eastern Cape and 48 in Western Cape over the same nine months. The death rate of two a day suggests the toll for

the full year of around 730, more than triple the official police figure for 1995.

In one case, police in Grassy Park in the Western Cape shot a suspected petty thief in the back of the head after he "tried to escape" by merely walking out of their charge office. In another, a 16-year-old youth, Angelo Asia, was arrested last June in Elsies River. He spent a few days in a police cell and died the next day in Tygerberg Hospital. His skull had been split from the nape of his neck to his eyebrows. The six officers involved in his arrest denied any wrongdoing. The state pathologist's report merely gave the cause of death as a "head injury".

Referring to the *Newsnight* footage, the head of the ICD, Neville Melville said, "The type of complaint that is the subject of this particular footage is the sort of thing which comes regularly to our office." He added that he was not surprised that the police allowed themselves to be filmed beating up suspects. In the minds of the police, suspects are already convicted criminals and, even if arrested are likely to be freed by the courts. In such circumstances, the police are attempting to dispense "instant justice". ICD regional head for the Western Cape, Riaz Saloojee said, "A lot of police are trigger happy. You can't help but speculate about whether people aren't just taking the law into their own hands, acting as executioners."

The crime rate inside the South African Police force is very high. Figures suggest that policemen are three times more likely to commit a crime than the average civilian. In 1997 there were 1,212 convictions of serving officers. In the first half of 1998 there were more than 400 convictions of serving police officers, including eight convictions for murder, extortion and indecent assault. The culprits include some of South Africa's highest-ranking officers. Jack Magatho, Secretary General of the Black Officers' Forum, said that internal disciplinary measures do not work and claimed that convicted officers often enjoy promotion.

Rising police violence occurs amidst the rapidly worsening conditions faced by the black majority of the population. Millions live in appalling poverty, with unemployment over 33 percent. The townships lack even the most basic facilities necessary for a decent human existence, like adequate housing, water and sanitation. Improvements in education and health care promised by the ANC government have not been forthcoming. The gap between the rich -- including a privileged black minority of businessmen and government officials -- and the mainly black working class widens every day. Millions of

young people are deeply disappointed and frustrated. They can see no hope for the future and some have turned to petty thievery. The crime rate in South Africa is now the highest in the world.

The response of the ANC has been to adopt increasingly repressive policies, strengthening the police force which was built up under apartheid. This includes an American-style law-and-order campaign. South Africa and the United States have pledged to broaden their already extensive ties by working together to fight crime, including providing training for South African police and prosecutors. The Peninsula Police have already introduced a "zero tolerance approach", which has included setting up more than 300 road blocks in the Cape Town area in one week, stopping and searching 11,000 vehicles. The National Police Commissioner, George Fivaz, warned that the police would "fight fire with fire".

The leadership of the ANC recognises that they are sitting on a social time bomb, which could explode at any time. In an effort to defuse it they have drafted Winnie Mandela into the townships to preach "patience", both about the worsening social conditions and about the police. Although Winnie Mandela was sacked from the government in 1995, she has retained popular support. She claims to be the champion of the South African masses, calling for a "revolution against poverty". On a whistle-stop pre-election tour of the townships last week she spoke to large crowds, advising them, "We know you need houses, but this is a problem that will take a long time to solve... We will deal with it after the election. We will come back." Her most significant remarks were addressed to and about the police. Speaking at the Itireleng squatter camp, near Pretoria, two days after the screening of the *Newsnight* film, she said that she "sympathises" with the police for doing a difficult job in tough circumstances.



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