

Mass protests against housing shortages in South Africa

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Mass protests have been taking place in the poverty-stricken neighbourhoods of Cape Town, Durban and Free State, South Africa, as well as in the country's administrative capital, Pretoria.

From early May onwards, the protests spread around the Cape Town area. Shantytown residents held protests in the Eastern Cape and Western Cape, and in Mpumalanga (in the northwest of South Africa) during the week ending May 27, and since then the actions have spread more widely. The main demands of those involved are for decent housing with sanitation, and an end to power cuts and water shutoffs.

In the Cape Town neighbourhoods of Langa, Gugulethu, Khayelitsha and Happy Valley, protesters invaded unused land, made barricades, burnt tyres and marched through the streets. In Khayelitsha, the protesters poured the contents of their night-soil buckets on a busy highway to express their anger at the lack of proper sanitation. In Happy Valley, 700 people protested on the streets on May 25 to demand the city council provide better housing. Also on May 25, in Blackheath near Cape Town, around 1,000 protesters set up barricades on one of the main streets.

Police used rubber bullets, tear gas and stun grenades to disperse demonstrators in Happy Valley, Blackheath, Gugulethu and in several other areas. Over 30 were arrested between May 23 and May 27. A spokesman for the residents of Happy Valley said that seven people had been seriously injured by the rubber bullets fired by police. The Johannesburg-based *Sunday Times* commented on May 29 that the unrest was "reminiscent of the 1980s," that is, at the time of the apartheid regime.

The unrest then spread to other areas such as Secunda in Mpumalanga, Nelson Mandela Metro in the Eastern Cape, Ocean View in Western Cape, Cato Manor in

Durban and Harrismith and Vrede in Free State. In Free State, demonstrators pelted the local government officials with stones, and in Pretoria demonstrators took to the streets of Lotus Gardens and Mamelodi to vent their anger at the lack of services.

Some of the protests were reported to be the result of growing anger amongst "backyarders," residents who live in shacks in the backyards of their family or friends, while others were against the squalid conditions in the shantytowns. At her squatter camp near Cape Town, Mzwandile Qolintaba told the Reuters news agency, "I feel a lot of pain, we don't have electricity, we don't have toilets ... our children are sick because we don't have any water. I am angry."

Rumours had spread that the Western Cape's plan for a new housing scheme would be mainly for shack dwellers recently arrived from the Eastern Cape, at the expense of local residents. After a fire in January devastated the Joe Slovo informal settlement in Langa, between 12,000 and 20,000 were left homeless. This further delayed the resettlement of people who had been on the waiting list for years.

A *Sunday Times* article on May 29, entitled "The story so far," explains that the protests have been building up for the last year. On July 5, 2004, around 3,000 protestors marched on the streets of Diepsloot, a town to the northwest of Johannesburg, demanding that councillors be sacked for the substandard services provided. Less than two months later, 17-year-old student Teboho Mkhonza was shot dead by police, who opened fire on demonstrators outside Harrismith in the Free State.

Demonstrations have taken place every month since. On March 15 this year, around 4,500 took part in a protest in Secunda, Mpumalanga. Crowds vented their anger on municipal offices and set up burning

barricades.

The response of the African National Congress (ANC) government has been to denounce the protests as the work of a “secret force” which is fomenting trouble in an attempt to overthrow democracy. It called in the National Intelligence Agency to investigate, and charged 13 demonstrators from last year’s protest in Harrismith with sedition, a charge carrying a maximum penalty of 15 years imprisonment. President Thabo Mbeki threatened that the full force of the law will be used against the illegal protests and the Western Cape premier, Ebrahim Rasool, echoed his words.

Thulani Mabanga, one of those being charged, told the *Mail & Guardian* on May 20 that the accused believed there was a political motive behind the decision to press charges of sedition, since their protests had not been intended to overthrow the government. “All the residents did was to burn tyres and march. Then police started shooting without warning. The police have no evidence of any wrongdoing by the protesters,” Mabanga said. The lawyer representing the 13 has confirmed that they are to be charged with sedition and public violence.

The idea that such prolonged disturbances, involving thousands of people from the poorest areas, were the result of “sedition” by a few individuals is a slander. Far from being the product of a “secret force” fomenting trouble, the current unrest is the result of anger that has built up over years due to the government’s broken promises and the continuing state of abject and degrading poverty to which millions of South Africans are still subjected, over 11 years after the end of apartheid.

An *Independent Media South Africa* report from Gugulethu on May 24 noted, “The uneven battle between police and residents was marked by violence only from the police side.”

The sudden appearance of manifold local groups—some of which have not yet decided on a name—shows that a build-up of opposition is taking political form amongst the working class and poor, although without any clear perspective, programme or party to guide it.

Mbeki later repeated his threat of repression, referring vaguely to “fault lines” in South African society “that can emerge and generate conflicts that we do not need.” He told parliament on May 25 that the protests “reflect

and seek to exploit the class and nationality fault lines we inherited from our past, which, if ever they took root, gaining genuine popular support, would pose a threat to the stability of democratic South Africa.”

When it came into office in April 1994, the ANC-led government promised to build 2 million houses in five years. But after 11 years, the figure is still only around 1.6 million—some of which are too small or substandard—and the population has grown considerably during that time. The housing problem is particularly acute around Cape Town, due to the rapid urbanisation that has taken place in recent years. According to a *Business Day* (Johannesburg) article on May 31, “There is an estimated backlog of 320,000 dwellings in Western Cape, with about 260,000 people on the waiting lists concentrated in the Cape metropole.”

A growing number of people live in informal housing, such as shacks in squatter camps. The number of such households grew by 31 percent from 1.05 million in 1996 to 1.38 million in 2001. During the same period, the number living in informal dwellings and shacks in backyards increased by 14 percent to 0.46 million people.

The number of houses completed or under construction from April 1994 to September 2003 was 1.53 million, but 2-3 million homes were still needed.

The number of people given shelter in the past 10 years is 7-8.5 million, but there are more than 7.5 million still in need of adequate housing. Because of population growth, this figure grows by about 204,000 every year.

The unrest over housing demonstrates that the division between the newly enriched layer who have benefited most from 11 years of ANC rule and those who have been left behind has widened to the breaking point. South Africa is already recognised to have some of widest disparities in the world between rich and poor, and the government response to the latest protests shows that its intention is to step up the suppression of opposition to its rule.



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