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Security becomes self-defeating

WHICHEVER way you look at it, the present system of detention without trial is doing the whole cause of State security more harm than good. And today the system has thrown up yet another case which, even at face value, is capable of the ugliest inferences. They are inferences inseparable from the system itself.

Nobody denies that the security police have a very difficult problem in dealing with an unseen, obdurate and potentially ruthless enemy. But what one can and must do is to judge the system on its results.

First, with all its controversial procedures and invasions of the rule of law it is uncovering very little subversion provable in court. Either there IS very little, and a lot of effort is being wasted, or this is not the way to find it.

Secondly because security police operations are cloaked in so much silence and secrecy they are not winning the confidence and co-operation of the general public. National security, which ought to be everybody's business, has become the private preserve of the security police.

Thirdly, because so many people are dying in detention, because detainees have no rights either living or dead, and because the police who detain them are subject to no independent supervision, it is being said—and we are sorry to have to reflect this—that the security system seems to be just another kind of terrorism not much to be preferred to the thing it is there to fight.

A security system which rightly or wrongly becomes fixed in the public mind as itself a source of horror, ceases to promote security. It is no good blaming the Press. Rumours about yesterday's deaths in detention (plural, because rumours always multiply numbers and distort facts) were rife in Johannesburg last night, 12 hours before any newspaper had published a word. In fact, if there were no Press, rumour would be even wilder and more damaging. The SABC served society and the police ill by not publishing the news even though they had it.

For the sake of the police themselves, and above all for the sake of national security, let normal judicial procedures be restored, let security suspects and let's see how we get on, South Africa could hardly do worse than it is doing now.