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RAND
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This ugliness must end

NEVER IN THE HISTORY of South Africa has a full judicial Commission of Inquiry been more urgently needed than now. It is imperative that the Prime Minister appoint one forthwith to investigate the methods of interrogation used by the Security Police. If he fails to do so then the public will be left to assume the worst.

As things stand there are probably few South Africans who don't believe in their own minds that the Security Police use third-degree methods. Many may justify it on the grounds that "we are at war" and these detainees are "enemies of the State". But that is another matter. What is important here is that nearly everyone believes it is happening and for that reason it is the State's duty to establish the truth publicly and conclusively.

It is bad enough in the first place that the Security Police should have such sweeping powers; they go way beyond what would be considered safe for democracy in any normal Western democracy. If, as the Government argues, unusual conditions in South Africa warrant the granting of these unusual powers, then they should be accompanied by unusual vigilance to ensure that there is no abuse.

But instead of this, the attitude of the authorities seems to be to avoid inquiry when questionable things happen. And there have certainly been enough questionable things in the eight years since detention without trial began in earnest.

Many allegations

To begin with solitary confinement — which seems to be standard procedure with the Security Police — is itself highly questionable. When it first began under the 90-Day Law, 60 psychiatrists, psychologists and medical specialists of the highest repute put their names to a statement condemning it as "inhuman" and equating it with physical torture. Since then the laws have become tougher and there have been instances of people being detained incommunicado and sometimes even unknown to the public, for as long as two years.

There have been detainees who had to go to hospital or receive medical treatment after their release. At least one we know of spent 43 days in a mental institution. There have been sworn affidavits from detainees alleging that they have been made to stand in one spot while being ceaselessly interrogated for periods ranging up to 70 hours.

There have been statements in court and in Parliament about detainees alleging that they have been assaulted and subjected to electric shock torture.

Yet in none of these cases has the truth been fully tested. In each case the authorities have shown a reluctance to have the allegations publicly ventilated, even when there have been excellent opportunities for this with detainees bringing court actions claiming damages for ill-treatment. The State has preferred to settle out of court "without admitting liability".

The 17 deaths

Thus Miss Stephanie Kemp, who claimed an interrogator had beaten her head against the floor, was paid R1 000 plus costs. Mr. Alan Brooks, who claimed his ankle had been broken, was paid an undisclosed sum. Mr. Gabriel Mbindi, who claimed he had suffered "cruel and brutal" assaults — including electric shock torture — was paid R3 000. And only last April the widow of the Imam Abdullah Haron, who died in detention, was paid R5 000. Which brings us to this alarming matter of the deaths.

To the best of our knowledge there have been 17 so far. Incredibly, one remains unidentified: only the statistical fact of his death was disclosed by the Minister of Justice in reply to a parliamentary question in January, 1969.

Of these, 10 are said to have committed suicide. And the vital question here is, what drove them to do so? Was it to ensure that they did not disclose information vital to some underground cause? Or was it because they could no longer endure the interrogation?

There are other questionable matters, too. Mr. Ahmed Timol is the second detainee to have plunged from a high-storey window. Bars were secured to the upper windows of The Grays after Mr. Suliman Saloojee fell to his death in 1964. Wasn't the same done at John Vorster Square when the Security Police moved there?

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Official silence

Then there was the case of Mr. Nicodemus Kgoathe, who was said to have slipped in a shower room and died of concussion. And the Imam, who was said to have fallen down a flight of steps and sustained 26 bruises and other injuries—not all of which, according to the inquest magistrate, could have been caused by such a fall.

But there has been no Commission of Inquiry into any of this. Not even after Mrs. Catherine Taylor, the MP for Wynberg, named a police sergeant whom she said had assaulted the Imam—and named two other policemen whom she said knew about this and were covering up the facts.

Not even after the Rev. Bernard Wrangmore had fasted for 66 days. And not even though the Prime Minister has shown a great readiness to appoint Commissions of Inquiry into much lesser matters.

Worst of all, however, is that the authorities seem to feel no need to inform the public when these things happen. There was no announcement of Mr. Timol's death, nor of Mr. Mohammed Essop's still unexplained hospitalisation. The public learnt of them yesterday only because relatives telephoned this newspaper.

The Chief of the Security Police is silent. The Commissioner of Police is silent. The Minister of Justice is silent. The Prime Minister is silent. Seventeen men have died in detention but the authorities think it is none of your damned business to know anything about it.

This is the arrogance of unlimited power that only a full inquiry can mitigate.