

RAND
Daily  MailTWO CASES THAT
FOSTER UNEASE

WHAT HAPPENED to two detainees this week did nothing to reassure us about the use being made of Section Six of the Terrorism Act. The indefinite detention clause is far too useful a police weapon to be reserved for terrorists on our borders, as a Cabinet Minister once said it would be. We never did fall for that disingenuous idea anyway, partly because one does not give a man a gun and then tell him not to use it; and partly because while the Minister may have harboured such a notion the Act did not.

It provided, quite specifically, for the detention of "terrorists and certain other persons." And it authorised senior police officers to detain anyone they had "reason to believe" was withholding information relating to offences under the Terrorism Act. Well, we know from experience that even an address to Black Sash women can be deemed an offence under the Act. And as for the "reason to believe" part — how much reason does a policeman need when he never reports to the public and only belatedly to a Cabinet Minister?

Now we are presented with two cases that seem to confirm our fears. A German photographer is held for seven days under the Terrorism Act. International pressure brings him the privilege of an embassy visitor. The visit takes place in the presence of two Security Branch colonels. Here, it seems, are all the elements of a terrorism drama. But, only a few hours later, the man is released unconditionally — after paying a fine of R20 for possessing dagga. And, yesterday, another detainee is brought to court after being held incommunicado for 18 days. He is charged merely with contravening the Suppression of Communism Act and the Customs and Excise Act, and granted bail of R100.

Both cases inevitably raise the question: How good were the police reasons for holding the men in the first place? And how good are the reasons for holding others? — an unknown number of others, let it be remembered. One of these days the Government and the Security Police may come to realise that they foster these doubts by continuing to show a high-handed contempt for them.