



ALLISTER SPARKS

The ugly action that kills goodwill

NOTHING THAT WE DO here in South Africa — not even apartheid itself — does us so much harm as the way we cast aside normal principles of justice and allow our Security Police to detain people without trial and subject them to third-degree methods of interrogation.

It is this that puts us beyond the pale and stamps us as a vicious nation as well as a racist one.

Many people in the West, while disliking our policies, can nevertheless appreciate the complexities of our racial problem and even sympathise with the White South African, especially the Afrikaner, in his special dilemma. But the sympathy and understanding vanish when our Security Police swoop and the secret interrogations begin — and the news seeps out of allegations of torture, of mental duress, of 17 mysterious and horrifying deaths and of the Government's refusal to investigate them publicly.

Then even our best friends shudder with revulsion.

Disillusionment

Nor is it only a matter of an adverse reaction abroad. Internally it has a devastating effect on any spirit of co-operation and national effort. Even people who are well disposed towards separate development shrink away in distress and disillusionment. As the old Brit-Boer dichotomy fades away, this has become the most divisive factor in our national life.

For nearly three months now I have been trying in this column to advance the idea that South Africans of all political persuasions should try to seek out areas of common ground between them so that we can mount a co-operative national effort to bring swift improvement to the lot of our Non-White population.

I have suggested that this is not only vital to improving race relations, which in turn is vital to our national security, but that it could also re-establish those important attributes of common action and common understanding that have been absent for so long from our national life.

It is an approach that has been welcomed in several quarters as a constructive contribution to our political debate, and which has caught the interest of the Government at the very highest level.

But today I must confess that I feel repelled from this whole line of thinking. My spirit recoils from the idea of offering any hand of co-operation to men who commit such actions or who can condone them.

This has got nothing to do with being soft on terrorists, as newspapers such as Die Vaderland with their superficial, smart-aleck politicking try to suggest. It is simply that I believe, along with a great many other South Africans, that a sense of justice is synonymous with human decency.

And it is not justice to give the police carte blanche to detain whoever they wish for as long as they wish, to subject them to the mental torture of months, sometimes years, of interrogation and solitary confinement; to show so little

human concern when so many die by suicide or in other mysterious circumstances; and to forbid the courts to interfere or the public to ask questions.

I am by no means alone in feeling this sense of repulsion. I spoke yesterday to Dr. Dennis Worrall and found him in a state of considerable despondency. He is a man who has been committed for many years to the idea of political co-operation. More than that, he is a man who has identified himself firmly with the philosophy of separate development. He feels and expresses considerable sympathy for the Nationalist cause. But he is repelled by the defilement of justice and finds his spirit of co-operation shaken.

"This kind of thing just turns you off completely," he said as we discussed this week's raids and detentions and the shocking death of Mr. Ahmed Timol.

And if that is the reaction of a man like Dr. Worrall, who is prepared to see the best in the Government, can you imagine what the reaction must be among the Non-White community? If a white liberal like myself is feeling a surge of anger and rejection in his breast today, can you imagine how the Indian community must be feeling?

Do you think these people are unaffected by the fact that all 17 of the detainees who have died while in the care of the Security Police have been Non-Whites?

Do you think this has done a lot to improve our race relations and ensure the loyalty and co-operation of our Non-White population in the face of a terrorist threat?

And then the authorities have the cheek — or the stupidity — to say they are acting in the interests of State security!

As for the common argument that one has got to act tough in our kind of situation — that we are at war and these detainees are enemies of the State who deserve whatever they get — this simply doesn't hold water.

Little subversion

In the first place all these thousands of raids and detentions that have taken place over the past eight years have uncovered remarkably little subversion that could be proved in court.

In the second place we are not engaged in a real war — not here in metropolitan South Africa at any rate, which is where nearly all the raids and detentions have occurred. If these were real terrorists being detained up on our borders (which was what the Terrorism Act was originally intended for) it would be a somewhat different matter. But here is no reason why the full South Africa there is no reason why the normal processes of law should not be observed.

Finally, even if we were in the throes of a full-scale war there are still accepted rules of conduct in the treatment of prisoners. Our detainees are treated worse than either prisoners of war or convicted criminals.

Perhaps the worst indictment against us is that even in peacetime we are violating the Geneva Convention.