





## Natal Violence


# THERE ARE FEW INNOCENTS

Photographs by Scotch Macaskill

Natal has seen some of the worst violence in South Africa's history and it has fallen to a few dedicated journalists to record the unfolding drama.

It has been a daunting task.

In this first 'For The Record' feature, **FRED KOCKOTT**, who spent five years as a reporter in Natal working mostly in the strife-torn townships, suggests the press has failed in its duty to keep readers informed.

Now read on 

# IT WAS BODY-COUNT JOURNALISM

**T**HREE words could summarise what I have to say on the media coverage of the Natal violence: "It has failed."

For many that statement needs little elaboration. The realities of the conflict largely remain untold. Ask a prosecutor, a builder, a shopkeeper, or a couple of doctors, lawyers, magistrates, churchmen and businessmen who have been exposed to some of these realities. Ask a policeman, a riot unit cop or plainclothes detective who has tried to solve mass murder cases. Better still, ask a judge, that most respected of commentators on society. And, if you are still unconvinced, speak to a couple of township residents.

But say to certain newsmen, particularly editorial decision makers, that the media has failed in Natal, and they will be down your throat in seconds, indignant at the slur on the trade.

It is to them that I dedicate this review. I dedicate it to them in the hope that what I write will spark some debate and a general rethink of editorial priorities.

For too long readers outside the townships – mostly comfortable in their modest or plush homes – have been lulled into a false sense of security and become bored with faceless, body-count journalism. In all that time law and order has broken down, through government proclamations and emergency regulations, and through murderous bloodletting in the streets. And now we reap the consequences. More guns pass hands today than licences are granted to trade. People believe we teeter on the brink of anarchy.

As journalists we need to place this in context. We need, through information, to counteract readers' fears, which are based largely on ignorance. We need to tell it like it is, not through twisted words of political players and official police spokesmen, but just as the mother of a victim would tell her family. We need to voice the words of such mothers. And, we need to investigate. Let's hope it is not too late!

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### Edendale Hospital

Outlying Pietermaritzburg's white suburbia and adjacent to Edendale Road there is a large facebrick building. The seven-storey complex stands behind concrete walls topped by rolls of razor wire. It rises above the uniform, square township homes and forever increasing number of shacks that litter the green landscape. Shacks sprawl out across the length and breadth of Edendale valley and out over the rolling hills to Elandsdorp, 36km away.

The tall building – the only one in the vicinity – is Edendale Hospital. Besides attempting to provide a health service for more than half-a-million black townfolk and serving as a referral hospital for more than 30 community clinics dotted throughout the Natal Midlands, the hospital is the major casualty centre for victims of Natal's political violence.

It is a conflict between the African National Congress and governing forces. It involves Chief Mangosuthu Buthelezi's Inkatha movement, police and supporters of the ANC and United Democratic Front. Doctors at Edendale get a first-hand glimpse of the extent of the trauma. The nurses, of course, live in it.

**I “  
hope  
either you  
or I wake  
up soon  
”**

The following letter, written by an Edendale doctor, appeared in *The Natal Witness*:

"The other morning I sat looking at my surroundings before setting off to work. The beautiful, rich green hills around 'Maritzburg, Sleepy Hollow, full of peace and serenity. I pinched myself hard; soon I would be at work facing the results of human beings' violence towards each other. Yet here

at home I could be detached from it, blissfully unaware of its existence. The last few days of escalating violence have heightened for me the disparity – a few kilometres apart – peace and war.

"I am fortunate enough to experience both, privileged because if I did not work at a large black hospital I would probably never realise what was happening on my own doorstep. It is easy to be ignorant of the harsh realities, either wilfully or through lack of information, but they exist and surely must be of interest to all who live in this area.

"Sometimes, as a foreigner, I feel that I have more interest in the goings on in this country than many of its own citizens. Here I think the press is partly to blame. Our information on the place in which we live is derived from our own experiences and by learning from others – such as the press.

"But here I find a great discrepancy between what I see every day and what I read in the news. When conflicts are reported they seem like isolated incidents – a few paragraphs of newspaper space hardly does justice to the enormity of what is happening.

"It may be nicer and safer to portray 'our' world in the heart of 'Maritzburg as the real one with township conflicts as isolated incidents, but is this fair to your readers? Is it not your duty to inform, and their right to know, what is going on in their own country?"

"For me the night must be day and day the night. I must dream all that I hear and see during the day. It must be a dream because so little of it is reflected in your newspaper, which is supposedly the real news of the life in Natal.

"I hope either you or I wake up soon."  
– Dr SJ Phillips, Edendale Hospital, Pietermaritzburg

Dr Sam Phillips had initially been wary of submitting her letter to *The Witness*. At Edendale Hospital doctors have to sign a contract which prohibits them from speaking to journalists. Writing a letter to the press could be inviting trouble. But she sent the letter. It was

## For The Record



### On the march in Sweetwaters

published under the heading: "Different Worlds".

She received no criticism from colleagues or superiors. However, a letter responding to hers did appear in the newspaper. It was written by an editorial decision maker of *The Witness*. It was headlined "What Shortcomings?"

"All right-thinking South Africans will be grateful to foreigners such as Dr SJ Phillips for coming here and lending a hand for a while. But there was nothing in his (sic) letter which I haven't already read in the local press. So perhaps Dr Phillips could write another letter and tell us exactly what it is that the local press is failing to inform us about the violence."

A debate had been sparked. It took place in the newsroom and in the local pub. Dr Phillips was told her letter was malicious and that she was ignorant of the functions of newspapers.

However, I believe Dr Phillips' letter was valid. My experiences in the townships convinced me our journalism was inadequate. I think Dr Phillips is right when she says it is time for editors to wake up. They should visit the townships. And, if they have, they should do so again and again...and send reporters to investigate.

### Déja vu

I drove into Sweetwaters, Pietermaritzburg. Déja vu! I had been there before.

*"...women and children stood gathered at the side of the road overlooking a township under siege. Detached, pointing, laughing, watching a battle loom. A distance below, a*

*group of men stood armed with assegais, pangas, kerries and sticks. Next to them was a contingent of army and police. The crowd blocked the only access road into the township. On an opposite hillside, a similar crowd had gathered, Nxamalala was surrounded..."*

Exact same place, same sights, but different time.

Last time I had seen bodies in the back of a bakkie – a man's head, split open, protruding from a blanket. I evacuated an elderly couple from Soweto. They had been trapped in Nxamalala for four days. Even the old man had been forced to fight. "God bless you, you saved our lives," were their last words.

“  
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”

This time I did not go in. The words of Sichizo Zuma, an Inkatha personality who had restrained supporters from threatening us at the previous clash, echoed in my mind: "Next time I'll let them do what they want!"

I drove cautiously towards the armed crowd and police. Police talked with the

leaders of the mob, ordering the supporters to sit. Within Nxamalala, two groups had gathered, ready to defend or attack.

Do I chance driving in? I hesitated. Hostile stares. In front of me the Inkatha crowd rose up. They were dispersing, toying towards me. I wavered. Behind me a bus blocked my passage. I could no longer see the police and army. I negotiated a gap and drove out.

Heading back to the office I contemplated what had transpired. There had been a battle, lives might have been lost, but I had not bothered to find out what had happened. My journalistic instinct had told me to go in. But what for? To return later to the office to fight for a couple of centimetres of space for my story, a story that would not tell what I had seen anyway? It simply was not worth it anymore.

The experience at Sweetwaters illustrated the resignation with which I had come to approach my job. My commitment was at its lowest ebb. In its place was fear; the fear that made me look over my shoulder in town; paranoia that made me watch my rear-view mirror when driving to Durban.

I could have coped if I were writing what I saw and investigating some of the stories. But most remained in my notebooks – uninvestigated, unpublished, unknown.

And there were many stories to tell. There *are still* many stories to tell. Creative ways were needed to report them. And time. And space. Instead it was just the violence...

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# NATAL VIOLENCE

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Violence, violence, violence. Everyday, violence. Four dead here. Five dead there. That's what most of the reporting amounted to.

*"They surrounded my house, forced me inside. They beat me with a stick. One threatened me with a firearm..."*

*"The child was looking for his father. They killed him. They cut his eyes out...It's been about a month now. All the schools have been closed. We hear gunshots quite often..."*

Such were the telephone calls I received almost every day. You then had to fight with a news editor to release you from the newsdesk to go and find out what had happened.

Now, after two years, my notebooks are littered with scribbled tales of death and destruction, evidence and lies. Tortured expressions still haunt my mind. But you adjust to it and each death means a little less until finally death is just another statistic.

When I saw someone I had interviewed a week or two previously, lying dead slumped in a kombi, I had to keep on working. Hey, there's been another shooting over there, and off I went.

I was sick and tired of it. I was sick of seeing death. I was sick of feeling nothing. I was sick of saying sorry. I was sick of being relied on to provide this coverage. I was sick of news contacts expecting me to be there. Above all, I was sick of the dead approach to news.

I believed the violence could end. I believed the press had a role. I still do.

## The Debate

"It's true", I told the newly appointed editor of *The Witness*, David Willers. "We might have done a better job than the other newspapers, but that doesn't mean much. It doesn't mean we are good press."

I had resigned from my job. Willers was in the chair of former editor Richard



On the pavement in Pietermaritzburg

Steyn, who is now editor-elect of *The Star*, South Africa's largest circulation daily newspaper.

Under Steyn's 15-year editorship, *The Natal Witness* enjoyed worldwide recognition and in the late '80s had earned a reputation for providing the most comprehensive coverage of the Natal violence.

When I sat and talked with the new editor about reporting the townships, I told him of the frustrations. I told him I had become scared and had frequently wondered whether I would make it back from a job. I told him what could be done and what I thought needed to be done.

Willers listened. I wasn't sure whether he was merely being diplomatic. But he had also worked as a journalist in townships. When violence had erupted in the Cape Flats in 1976, Willers was there, writing for *The Cape Times*.

So I talked, or rambled as people who know me would say. I told Willers about a series of incidents that had occurred that weekend:

● There was a shooting at a bus rank near my home in Pietermaritzburg. I heard two gunshots. The next day a colleague was told that two special constables had been shot;

● In Edendale a man strolling with his girlfriend had his face hacked up with a bushknife;

● In Gezibuso a woman was sleeping when men claiming to be police broke

into her home. They stabbed her and her baby. The woman had too many wounds to document;

● In another incident, two sisters were shot. Both had identical gunshot wounds in the breast and thigh. They had been sleeping in the same bed when the attack occurred...

The man, baby and three women were among 54 patients treated in casualty at Edendale Hospital that weekend. At least 45 were trauma cases – 21 had either been seriously stabbed or assaulted, 12 had been shot, and 12 injured in car accidents.

Yet none of these incidents appeared in the press that week. The police had reported no incidents of political violence for that weekend. A story in *The Witness* on Monday reported several incidents of arson and stone throwing in other parts of the country, but no incidents from Pietermaritzburg.

On Tuesday, it was the same.

What had happened? How had reporting deteriorated to a level where it did not consistently provide information to counter deficient police reports? How come police were no longer accountable for the provision of regular and accurate information? Why was so little information getting to the newspapers?

In the townships people confronted violence at every turn. On their way to work, at work, in the city, at home, at play, at weddings, at community meetings, in their beds at night. Life in the townships, never normal under Apartheid, was now very abnormal. Coping with threats or the death of a friend had become as habitual for residents of the townships as it was for people in suburbia to lock their front door security gates when they left home each day.

While cemeteries expanded in Pietermaritzburg, elsewhere in the country people lived oblivious to the fact that a problem of national dimensions was looming.

In Natal many residents outside the townships were aware something was amiss. Others just thought it was blacks killing blacks – an attitude propagated by government and made credible by the daily press reports. A blanket existed for irregular and undercover security force activity – now a real and active legacy of the past three years. In Pietermaritzburg errant acts by policemen, like those who worked under self-chosen pseudonyms like Rambo, Boss and McGyver, began

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No place to run and no place to hide.

to happen more frequently.

“What is actually happening?” the more discerning readers asked. They were not given answers by the press, only a daily dose of headlines – “Five more die in Mpumalanga”; “Six die in two shootings”; “Families flee township”; “Pupil killed in clash”.

The name of the game was body-count journalism. And, as records at Edendale Hospital illustrated, the media was even failing at that.

I gave David Willers another letter from Dr Sam Phillips – an overdue response to the newspaper’s challenge.

Dr Phillips had been on duty that Sunday. She had treated many patients, including the man whose face had been hacked up with a bushknife, the two sisters with gunshot wounds and the stabbed woman and baby.

The words in her letter: “There is consistently much trauma...The extent of this trauma is not reflected in the press coverage” had rung true.

### Contacts silenced

“What Dr Phillips should realise is that there is a two-way relationship between any community and the newspaper which purports to serve it,” said Wyndham Hartley, political editor of the *The Witness*.

“No story just gets into the newspaper. There has to be some interplay between

the community and that newspaper.”

Hartley’s argument is that if information is not forthcoming from the community, a newspaper cannot be expected to perform its job properly.

But is not the onus on a newspaper to develop and maintain its contacts in the communities?

“**Eno  
fruit salts  
and razor  
blades**”

If one examines *routine* contact lists in newsrooms, it is evident that little attention is devoted to finding out what happens inside the townships. There are telephone numbers for headmasters of white schools, for government officials and academics and even contacts in the House of Delegates and House of Representatives. But there are few contacts in black communities.

“Sensitive black contacts were never

put on lists for obvious reasons,” said Hartley.

In covering the townships you always had to protect your contacts. I preferred taking a clean notebook into the field for fear of being stopped by police and having my notes confiscated.

Some reporters tried hard to establish and maintain township contacts. The general reporters were only encouraged to keep regular contact with city officials, police, paramedics and firemen. They were rarely, if ever, instructed to telephone possible sources of information in the townships. In Pietermaritzburg I never heard a reporter being told to develop a contact at Edendale Hospital. And judging from maps on some newsroom walls, the townships might well have not existed.

So there is a dearth of reporting on the townships. A newspaper such as *The Natal Witness* primarily serves the white community on which it depends for sales and advertising revenue.

Pictures of people grimacing and gritting their teeth while shotgun pellets are fizzed out of wounds with the aid of Eno fruit salts and razor blades have never made the Natal press. It is mostly after-the-fact pictures of corpses.

Reporters often had to fight for space to write “heavy” stories about Natal’s killing fields. They were published

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against the advice of advertising managers who live closer to the newspaper's purse strings.

The argument was that too much politics in the news pages would depress sales and ultimately impact on advertising revenue.

And conservative white readers certainly did get irked by the type of stories that finally appeared. Several even labelled *The Natal Witness* as "Pravda". The end result was that serious journalists were continually slapped in the face by arguments for a "lighter" newspaper.

Returning to the reliance on the community for information, Wyndham Hartley argues that the South African press did not come through the State of Emergency unscathed. Besides sparking self-censorship, the emergency regulations effectively shut down the relationship between newspapers and the community.

"The emergency incarcerated sources or silenced them in other ways. The prime mechanism of silencing people was fear. People such as Dr Phillips are a remnant of that shut down," said Hartley.

The emergency regulations certainly took their toll. They were all encompassing. But reporters could still venture into unrest areas, even if it meant continually dodging the police. Getting into the townships against police orders became a game. It took your mind off death and your own fears.

We still took pictures and sometimes published them. There were also creative ways of telling stories without directly contravening the emergency regulations. At *The Natal Witness* these were occasionally explored and some stories directly contravening the regulations were also published. At one stage *The Witness* faced 14 charges in terms of the Police Act, the Internal Security Act and the emergency regulations.

I remember hoping some of the charges would be pursued so we could further investigate some of the stories. But predictably the charges were dropped by the police, who could have been further exposed.

The regulations do not adequately explain why the press failed to report effectively in the townships. Since the first day of the emergency, June 11, 1986, the regulations provided defensible reason for newspapers *not* to report what was happening. And as time passed, the regulations became a screen behind which certain newspapers could hide their own inactivity. We now reap the consequences.

Vital  
evidence  
could be  
missing

### Prime test

The prime test in judging how the press has covered the Natal violence, is to examine the state of affairs in the townships.

In the townships people talk of well-known killers who roam the streets confident they will not be arrested, let alone convicted. The environment is such that township dwellers say they might witness a murder and recognise one of the killers. The matter may be reported to the police. Two days later the same person is still walking the streets.

Perhaps he is overheard talking openly of how he killed the "dog". And he is seen killing again. Maybe this time the victim is a brother or a close friend. Again the matter is reported to police. Perhaps the man is taken in for questioning. A week later he may be seen at the forefront of an armed crowd, policemen standing by or negotiating with him to disperse. Perhaps he is a person who police rely on for information...

For three years it has been like that. People say they have been forced to

resort to quicker methods of justice, by taking the law into their own hands. It has gone by unchecked. Slogan-bred youths acting under the banner of the ANC/UDF are often at the forefront. Each action sparks retaliation. Most victims are innocent – killed by virtue of where they live and which leader they support.

Within this environment, key perpetrators (in the Pietermaritzburg region they number less than 10) remain active in the field. Police know them. Journalists know them. Residents know them. The term "warlord" is sometimes used to describe them. Some have been summonsed to court, but they have never been convicted.

Something is fundamentally wrong. The state of criminal justice in Natal's townships has literally broken down.

The question is: Would the press have allowed the situation to deteriorate to such an extent in the white community?

Would the press have tolerated a similar state of justice to exist in white suburbs?

The media is powerful. Unfortunately in the case of Natal, it has not exercised its power responsibly. Take the situation where well-known killers are not brought to trial; when people who would almost certainly be sent to the gallows remain at large and leaders of an organisation. And what about the cases on record where a person is brought to trial, but crucial evidence, such as a gun, is lost by police?

Should the press not have been more active under such circumstances? Should it not have tried to investigate further? Should it not have made more people accountable?

"The press is not an instrument of justice," I was once told. "We are observers and recorders of fact."

The fact, however, remains that the press has seldom observed or recorded the collapse of criminal justice in Natal.

The truth is no journalists have ever been *assigned* to document the legal process, in particular:

- how many people might have witnessed a killing;
- how long it took police to act on information; and finally;
- how much available evidence is eventually led in court (that is, if a suspect was ever arrested).

Such stories could have acted as a catalyst in bringing known criminals to book, yet they have never been written.

## For The Record

Vital evidence could be missing in a murder trial, but newspaper reporters will never know this. Unfortunately there are not many journalists who can access such information and none who are *taught* how to.

There has also been no examination of what it must be like to police the conflict; like coming under fire from snipers or being confronted by stone-wielding youths who display no fear of bullets.

And has the workload of detectives ever been examined? Riot Investigation detectives in Pietermaritzburg were once carrying about 50 dockets each. First they have to find witnesses. Once found, most are reluctant to make a statement, let alone go to court to testify. Appearing in court is risky as the person becomes a potential target. Witnesses *have been* killed. Exactly how many, no one can say.

Finally, has the press ever told you how many convictions have been brought in connection with about 4 000 unrest-related deaths in Natal since 1987?

Civil rights lawyers argue that by June 1990 fewer than 50 prosecutions had been brought for the first 2 500 *unrest-related* killings in the Natal Midlands – most of which failed.

This is dismissed as “naked propaganda” by Justice Minister Kobie Coetsee. He recently released statistics showing that of 6 770 prosecutions in Natal for murder and culpable homicide in the past three years, 1 620 resulted in murder convictions. However, there is no indication as to how many of these prosecutions were brought in connection with *unrest-related* killings.

The Justice Department says it cannot provide such details. Surely the press should demand that it does?

### Watchdog

While the press is not an instrument of justice, it does have a watchdog function which has yet to become active in Natal. In this light it must shoulder some responsibility for letting Natal's townships degenerate into violent social decay.

Imagine if a mayor of a city was found, “on the balance of probability”, to be responsible for killing a man, but remained in office. Would the press keep quiet? I cannot imagine so.

But in Pietermaritzburg a well-known character was found by an inquest magistrate, to have been possibly responsible for the murder, in 1987, of a mother and her 11-year-old daughter. The matter was referred to the Attorney General for a decision on prosecution. The man has never been charged. He cultivates, as confirmed by the Ministry of Law and Order, friendly relations with high-ranking police officers.

He is now a member of the KwaZulu Parliament. The press has never pursued the story about the murder of mother and child and let the public know what evidence exists against him. Instead it uses him as an official spokesman for Inkatha.

The “  
next day  
he was  
murdered”

There was once a town councillor in Pietermaritzburg who murdered, again and again. He became Pietermaritzburg's most notorious “warlord”. His death was met with a sigh of relief in Pietermaritzburg city and celebrated in the township streets, particularly in Imbali where he had been most active.

My worst nightmares ended the day of Jerome Mncwabe's death. So did those of a colleague who lived with me at the time. Two nights in a row we both had vivid dreams of Mncwabe. The next day he was assassinated.

Why did the press never ask what this man was doing for the community as a town councillor? Should this not have been the task of a municipal reporter, instead of just reporting on white city council affairs? Mncwabe was, after all, a member of local government, supposedly elected by people to take a leading role in the development of the community.

Instead Mncwabe and his cronies,

developed a Mafia-style operation. A youngster, then 14 or 16, who became his protégé, got access to guns and ammunition. The first shots he fired only maimed people – about six. But later Derick Phumulani Mveli, commonly known as “S'khweqe”, shot to kill. His last *seven* victims were all shot repeatedly in the head near the left ear.

On the evening of January 16, 1989, he walked along Imbali streets and in front of witnesses he shot four people in this manner, seemingly without fear of arrest. Among his victims was Simphiwe Majozi, an 11-year-old boy on his way to buy cooldrink.

S'khweqe killed for the sake of killing. He was well known in the community. He was always well dressed, had permed hair and travelled in councillors' cars.

Mveli was known to the police at the time of his first attempted murder of a man, Sibusiso Sibisi, on October 27, 1988. He was named as the suspect on the attempted murder docket. Police also knew his address. Despite this, it was only after Mveli had taken to the streets, killing, killing, and killing again that effective police action was taken. He was arrested seven days after his final killing spree, and 88 days after he had attempted to kill Sibusiso Sibisi.

After he was arrested, the charges against him were withdrawn. Mveli was placed in the custody of the Security Police, detained in terms of the emergency regulations.

Why? Why detain a man when he is a suspect about to stand trial?

Why? That was the question the press should have repeatedly asked. Many people knew about Mveli at the time. If the press did not, they should have. He was named in a dossier that was compiled on the role of the police in vigilante violence in the Pietermaritzburg area.

It was only when a Supreme Court judge, Andrew Wilson, convicted Mveli of multiple murders and attempted murders, that this question was publicly addressed.

“We have grave difficulty in seeing or understanding how any member of the Security Police...could have bona fide formed the opinion that the detention of the accused was necessary,” Judge Wilson said.

“The effect of his detention was to  
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prevent, so we have heard, the investigating officers from having access to the accused and thereby interfering with and delaying the investigation of very serious charges against him. We feel that there should be some public explanation made of this apparent official interference with the administration of justice."

Judge Wilson and his two assessors, said public explanations were also needed on:

- Why Mweli's murder weapon (a FN-Browning pistol stolen from a murdered policeman) was still circulating in the community after his arrest? It was later used in another murder.

- Why police failed to arrest Mweli after his first offence?

- Why was Mweli arrested under the dubious circumstances of negotiating with an Inkatha leader who was suspected of being implicated in five counts of murder?

- How police lost the firearm that Mweli allegedly used in the commission of the first seven offences, including the murder of the policeman from whom the FN-Browning was stolen?

Judge Wilson said criticisms he had made of the police investigation were not directed at the force as a whole, but rather at specific individuals.

The Mweli conviction was a landmark judgement. It was the first time a well-known killer in Natal's townships had been convicted for multiple murders. The trial not only dramatically illustrated conditions in the townships, the corruption and killings, but also the irregular processes of law and collusion between policemen and key Inkatha members.

It also illustrated how a youth's mind had become warped by elders; how he had become a "deliberate callous murderer" who "killed for the sake of killing and enjoyed doing it".

After being sentenced to a total of more than 200 years of imprisonment, Mweli said: "You know me! You know

the people I have killed...I killed many others...These are only the few they got me for."

Yet the trial did not receive any special attention in the press. It was only documented at length two months later in a supplement sponsored by the Natal business community. And despite the blatant evidence of maladministration of justice, the press have not yet taken up Judge Wilson's call for the police to explain.

The question is: Will it ever?

The seriousness of the situation lies in the fact that from my experience, what was exposed in the Mweli trial, were not isolated facts but part of a greater picture.

Besides just asking for explanations, the press should do some of their own investigations. If they dig just a little deeper, they might learn that some key Inkatha leaders have been police informers for years. If they look into the background of the Mweli case, they might hear about a confession or confessions that Mweli made to police which were not even heard in court.

They might be surprised at what they find out. And they might even, like me, get frightened.

Dig  
just a  
little  
deeper

After five years working as a journalist in Natal, I cannot recall many stories related to the conflict that have been fully investigated and taken to their conclusion.

For every white murder committed, reporters would be consistently questioning the police about their progress with the investigation. This rarely happened with township murders. It was just another nameless statistic. And stories were rarely followed up.

I could cite almost every story that I covered as an example. Take an 11-year-old named Prince Hlela Makhaye. A pic-

ture of the boy being wheeled into Mpumalanga clinic landed on my desk last year. He was clutching his stomach and died soon after the picture was taken. A policeman allegedly shot him when Prince went to school to collect his school report.

An inquest was due to be held, but no newspapers followed it up.

A year ago I concluded a feature story on the murderous events in a tiny rural township called Trust Feed, near New Hanover, with the following statement:

*"Observers are now wondering whether the findings of the New Hanover magistrate will spark further investigations into the events in Trust Feed, or whether the issue, and the unsolved killings will again fade from the spotlight and public scrutiny."*

This story revolved around the murder on December 3, 1988 of 11 people who had gathered at a Trust Feed home to hold a wake for an elderly man, Mr Ze Sithole who had died of natural causes.

At about 3am armed men knocked on the door and randomly opened fire, killing six women, two children and three men. The incident was dubbed the 'Trust Feed Massacre'.

Our investigations at the time, conducted under trying circumstances, suggested a possible security force operation in which Inkatha gangs drove out members of a residents' committee, burning several of their homes and the chairman's shop.

After the massacre, hundreds of residents fled and the township was left in control of Inkatha officials, who today remain the *de facto* rulers of the area.

Prior to being driven out, the residents' committee, which had successfully resisted government plans for forced removal, had negotiated with authorities for the area to be developed. A clinic costing R59 000 was nearing completion, the water supply had been improved and roads had been upgraded at a total cost of R65 000 and employing 103 local residents.

A government report leaked to the press revealed that Inkatha had been attempting to "have the South African Government put them in control of Trust Feed in direct conflict with the wishes of the people of Trust Feed". It said this was discussed at a meeting convened by the the government's Joint Management Committee.

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No one was ever arrested in connection with the Trust Feed massacre, and there was no further publicity about events in Trust Feed until an inquest magistrate pronounced last year that circumstantial evidence placed suspicion on two special constables. He also said there was possible complicity on the part of the former station commander of New Hanover, Lieutenant Brian Mitchell. He referred the papers to the Attorney General for a decision on prosecution.

Then editor of *The Natal Witness*, Richard Steyn, objected to my concluding remarks in the article about the magistrate's finding. *The Witness* had adequately documented events in Trust Feed, he said.

That was at the time of the massacre. "What had happened since?" I argued. My concluding remarks were published.

To date there have been no more stories on the Trust Feed massacre.

Has the Attorney General been asked whether he has decided to prosecute the suspects? Have the police been asked to comment on their investigations? Is the matter being investigated at all?

If reporters had investigated, they might have uncovered interesting evidence.

But no journalists have even read through the inquest records. Nor have there been any reports of what happened to the residents who fled the area or the state of the development projects in Trust Feed.

"Well, where are the stories? Why haven't you written them?" I was once asked. I was told my criticisms were a reflection of my own inability to do my job properly. There is truth in that statement. My criticism does stem from dissatisfaction with my own work. There were opportunities to dig deeper into a story and write analytical accounts. But the workload was great. Besides, you also became desensitised, dehumanised; you basically stopped thinking.

As Bryan Pearson, a reporter who provided some of the best coverage of the Natal conflict, recently wrote: "The risk of reporting on violence day after day is not so much that you may be killed as that you may get used to the bodies, the smell of death, the gaping stab wounds, the tortured expressions on the faces of the disfigured victims. Once you are this dehumanised, life takes on a dull listless hue and you very quickly lose your

creativity."

I often felt that dull, listless hue about my life. I still do. One lives with unwritten stories...The teenage girl bandaged head to toe in hospital as a result of petrol-bomb burns...the girl whose mother cried and thanked me when I offered to take books to her dying daughter...The stories are legion.

It was obvious we needed more than one reporter to work the township beat. Pearson and I worked together for a while, but even then there was far too much to document effectively.

Well,  
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Pearson eventually left. Better pay and prospects attracted him to *Agence France Press* in Johannesburg. He left a gap in reporting Natal which has never been filled.

Given conditions in the townships, people might wonder why no journalists have been killed while covering the conflict. Teachers, bricklayers, lawyers, doctors, headmasters, accountants have been killed, but no journalists. It is simply because there have seldom been any journalists in the field.

Journalists who have worked on the ground can all talk of close shaves. All have ended up frustrated and most share the attitude that the Natal story remains untold.

Bryan Pearson maintains that the Johannesburg newspapers showed up Natal's newspapers when the violence erupted on the reef.

"Reporters did everything. They camped with squatters. Stayed in the hostels. They did all the things that should've been done in Natal," said Pearson.

Isabel Koch, deputy news editor of *The Witness*, and former crime reporter of *The Eastern Province Herald*, argues that coverage of Natal violence was inadequate when compared with how *The*

*Herald* had tackled unrest in its time. But that was *before* the State of Emergency.

At the *Sunday Tribune*, reporter Brian King said there were many stories needing investigation in the Durban region.

"Some are sensitive and potentially dangerous. You would need time to tackle them, but it is never given to reporters."

In Natal allegations abound about trained 'hit squads', para-military training camps and mercenaries. A story by Eddie Koch of *The Weekly Mail* that alleged that Inkatha members had been trained at SADF camps in East Caprivi was the only recent investigation of these murky areas. The newspapers seldom look beyond the immediate news.

Newspaper bosses are not taking cognisance of journalists' frustrations. They are losing good people as a result. The environment is simply unprofessional.

There has been little coordinated response from the newspapers to the violence. Most good stories that have appeared were largely due to individual initiative.

At the *Witness* there was no coordination between a reporter working in the field, the crime reporter and court reporters. At other newspapers there was little to coordinate.

Most frustrating was that what you learned was seldom adopted by the newspapers. On the surface there was little interest in what you were uncovering in the field. Perhaps just a quip: "Heh Fred, how's the revolution?"

And what reporters did write was not intelligently recorded. In newspaper libraries you will find a file on Bjorn Borg, but try and find one on a key character of Natal's conflict. One had to keep one's own references.

My resignation from *The Natal Witness* was largely due to the realisation that as long as I remained on the township beat, there would be no one else covering the townships and I would never have time to follow any stories. I was frustrated with the press. I was frustrated with my own limitations. For two years I had worked, and the Natal story had not been written. I wanted to write. That's why I resigned.

I think what best epitomises the failure of the media is the issue of names, names of the people killed. There have been more than 4 000 people killed in Natal,

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yet fewer than five percent have received the posthumous privilege of their names appearing in print.

Perhaps that's all that needs to be said about editorial perceptions of the violence. Khumalos and Ndlovus were not important enough to have their names published.

Under the emergency regulations it was police policy not to release victims' names. Whenever I asked why, I was told it would place the victims' lives in jeopardy. That the victims were already dead never deterred police from using this argument.

But we persisted. On occasions I would battle for two days to get the names of victims. I believed it was a fundamental duty, but again space constraints dictated – names were sometimes subbed out of the story.

And so while the media focused obscurely on atrocity after atrocity in the townships, it left unrest monitors to tally up the nameless and faceless statistics of the carnage.

At the Centre for Adult Education, Natal University, Pietermaritzburg, researchers managed to document every published statistic on unrest deaths and incidents in the Natal Midlands. They obtained and recorded more than 65 percent of the victims' names. It's a pity the press was not as motivated.

## Parrots

"You say the media's failed," editor of *The Sunday Tribune*, Jonathan Hobday, said to me. "Failed to do what? Failed to report the violence? Our newspapers are filled with violence. In fact, our readers complain that we don't put anything else in the paper. There are sensitivities that have to be observed and balances that have to be preserved.

"Newspapering is a varied art. The mass circulation papers are catering for a very broad cross section of people, from conservative to liberal, from man to

woman, from black to white. It is not simply going about reporting deaths. Newspapers sell parrots as well. They also report the results of the jukskei.

"To say that we have failed is the easiest thing in the world to say. It's less than perfect, we know that. We could have done better? Yes. Why didn't we do better? There are hundreds of reasons, some of them because it was made impossible. Perhaps we could have had more get up and go, been more sensitive.

"One aspect is the law. If the law says you can't report something, you have two choices. You don't report it, or else you break the law and you close down. There is no point being the best newspaper if you are not on the street.

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better

"There are also economic constraints. Newspapers have had staff cuts over the years. Journalists have been underpaid so the quality of journalists has deteriorated. At most newspapers there are fewer staff, often less experienced staff. This is obviously going to affect the performance of the press.

"Constraints of repressive legislation and restraints for economic reasons mean we have been unable to do as an effective a job as we would have liked. We have done our best. Is that failure? We keep trying hard and we are very sensitive to criticism. We respond as best we can with the limited resources at our disposal – meaning editorial space and staff – to do the job we should do, which is to keep the public informed."

The discussion with Hobday revealed the tight-rope that media decision makers walk between social conscience and commercially viable journalism. Observing sensitivities and preserving balances, is Hobday's job. His foremost directive from newspaper owners is to boost sales and ensure a profit.

"There has always been an uneasy partnership between editors and managers," Hobday explained. "We believe our business is to produce excellent newspapers to ensure a profit. But management says the business is to make a profit to produce excellent newspapers. This is the core of the conflict. It shifts this way and that.

"The major problem is that newspaper managements have not reinvested profits in ensuring editorial excellence," said Hobday.

It is within such constraints that a newspaper such as *The Sunday Tribune* acts on social conscience issues. When given an opportunity to publish a series of in-depth articles on the Natal conflict, Hobday contacted associates in the business community and sold the idea of producing a special supplement on Natal. Eight weeks later it was on the streets as a tabloid supplement entitled: 'Towards the New Natal'. It was a mammoth production – 48 pages of differing opinions on Natal's problems, personalities and prospects.

That big businesses such as the NBS, Sappi, New Republic Bank, Prefcor, BP, and the South African Sugar Association were prepared to sponsor such an editorial project is indicative that there is something amiss in the general press coverage, and an indication that the deterioration of every facet of life in Natal has been accompanied by scant interpretation in the media.

The fact is that people who are well informed about the conflict, do not owe their insight to the media, but more to their own dealings in the community.

A situation has arisen where the enlightened business community appears to be ahead of the press in their perception of the problems facing Natal. The social responsibility of business to address the situation in Natal has advanced beyond the ability of the press to report the story.

Yet within the media there is still the age-old argument of newspapers having to sell to attract advertisers; of the public being tired of reading about death and destruction in the townships; and advertisers subsequently getting scared away by too much politics in the news pages.

The peculiar dynamics that keep South Africa's newspaper presses rolling should not be flouted as reasons why a newspaper is not reporting events in its

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own backyard. The foremost task of newspapers is to keep the public informed.

The argument that people have grown weary of reading about more deaths is perhaps most valid. I would argue that readers are bored senseless by the present coverage of political violence. As a journalist, I am intensely interested in what is happening, but when I pick up a daily newspaper and read a headline stating that there have been 10 more deaths in Mpumalanga, I seldom bother to read the story, but will only scan it to see if any relevant information is included.

The solution is not simply to cut down on editorial space for the coverage of political violence, but to search for alternative and creative ways of bringing the reality home to readers. Write about a woman giving birth while her home is petrol-bombed, and you immediately engage readers' attention.

Instead of justifying the status quo, editorial decision makers should be consistently evaluating the news coverage, searching for new angles and information and directing reporters accordingly. But today reporters often fight their own newspapers to do their job.

As a relatively inexperienced reporter, I was out there on my own, with no one to direct me, encourage or criticise me. Initially my own sympathies did intrude on my work, one is always more sympathetic to people who support a similar cause to one's own. But I quickly learned that partisan reporting causes untold harm and even fuels the conflict. There were few innocents out there. It's a lesson that was never learned by the alternative press.

The alternative press, as *The Star's* Harvey Tyson remarks, was a valuable protest medium in times of censorship and oppression and played a proud and significant role.

However, it has, particularly in the case of Natal, remained a one-eyed watchdog, quick to expose horrific deeds

by Inkatha members and its warlords, but slow, very slow to criticise, let alone expose, the violent excesses perpetrated by members and supporters of the so-called "mass democratic movement".

Journalists talked, but seldom wrote about *indiscipline* – often a euphemism for murder – among the ranks of ANC supporters.

And even when the classic "comrade-killing-comrade" syndrome had become commonplace in Natal, the alternative press remained silent.

It was an issue the regular press could not begin to tackle – there was simply not enough space. But the alternative press, with its complete devotion to extra-parliamentary politics, had ample opportunity to do so.

However, to quote Rian Malan, author of *My Traitor's Heart*, such newspapers remained "apartheid atrocities from cover to cover".

The picture the alternative media painted of Natal, portrayed the charterist Left as nothing but innocent victims of police/Inkatha violence.

The alternative press never analysed how Inkatha managed to mobilise massive forces to launch assaults on communities or why people did so. It would have learned that it was perhaps not so much subscription to Inkatha as an organisation but as a vehicle for retaliation and revenge. People felt aggrieved.

## Truth

Until the media acknowledges that it has failed to tell the Natal story, it will never improve. Newsmen must accept that the press is an integral part of the abnormality of the South African society, and just as schools need to open to all races, the doors of the media need to open so that the reporting accurately reflects the society we live in.

Natal's violence was often treated as if it were occurring in a different world.

As I write, Nxamalala is under siege again. In *The Witness* there is a front page headline: "Men dressed as domestics in attacks on residents – claim".

The story alleges that riot unit policemen dressed in domestic workers' uniforms joined the assailants.

There is no story on Nxamalala in *The Daily News* or *The Natal Mercury*. *The Witness* has published a picture of a Nxamalala resident packing up his belongings before fleeing the area.

But has the story of Nxamalala ever been told? What has happened there since I first visited? How many people have been killed, and who were they?

Police spokesman cannot readily provide such information. Academic researchers, however, can do so with ease.

Had the police consistently been asked for such details, including victims' names, the flow of information would never have broken down.

And if the flow of information in newspapers' own backyards is lacking, in outlying areas it is almost non-existent. Where the press is inactive – almost everywhere outside the boundaries of greater Pietermaritzburg and Durban – the police often do not report incidents.

Admittedly the inability of police spokesmen to respond effectively to queries is a legacy of emergency rule. In terms of the regulations, information for the daily unrest reports by-passed the local police spokesmen and were filed from riot unit officers directly to police headquarters in Pretoria where an official version was compiled. The police reports would often bear no resemblance to the actual events.

A youth shot in the street in cold blood, might have been reported as a casualty when police dispersed an "illegal gathering".

Whenever possible I highlighted such discrepancies. But this was not enough. The problem needed to be addressed at a higher level. Editorials needed to be written about the sketchy and often inaccurate police reports. Editors should have met and forced senior police, if not the Minister of Law and Order himself, to address *this* problem. But police were left to compile their own versions of incidents. They were never challenged by editors to provide a more intelligent commentary; the police were never made accountable for the provision of misleading jargon.

What is disturbing is that newspapers purport to be concerned about accuracy. Yet today official comment appears to carry more weight than the truth itself.

Of all the things I learned in Natal, I learned most about truth. I learned that no one likes the truth. If you sought the truth, you made enemies – in the police, Inkatha and the ANC.

But more disturbing, even journalists and editors do not like the truth – we don't like the truth that we have failed.