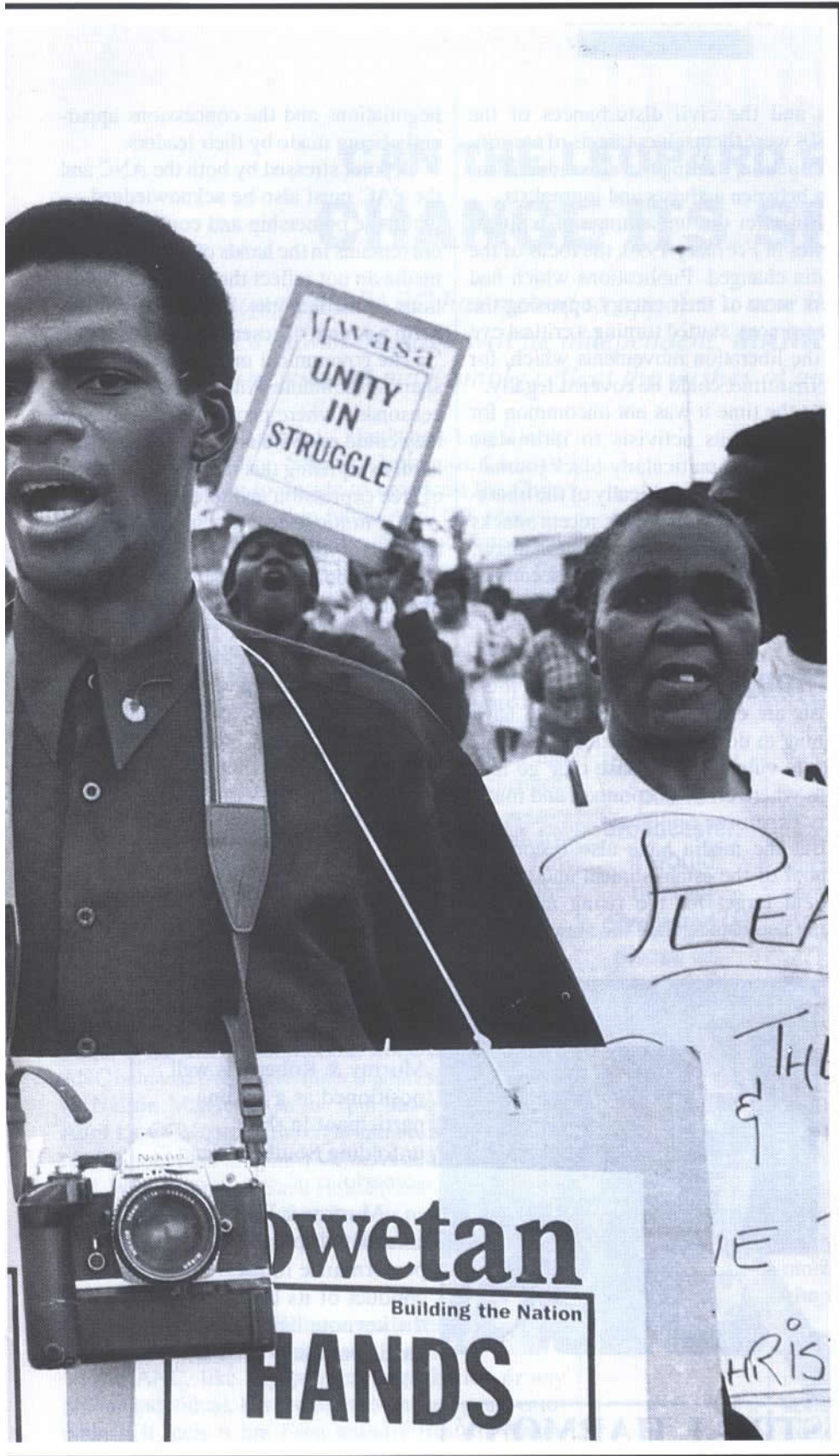


TARGETING THE



MEDIA

By Karen Stander
 Pic: Kevin Carter
WEEKLY MAIL

THE irony was not lost on the sullen-faced youths watching our progress through the dusty streets of Sharpeville. This march by hundreds of journalists and media workers was to protest the killing of a fellow journalist by a section of the Sharpeville community.

A few days before, Calvin Thusago, a television reporter for the SABC, and his cameraman Dudley Saunders were sent to do a story for CCV news about the desecration of graves in a Sharpeville cemetery, allegedly by members of the AWB.

They had shot their visuals and were leaving the township when their car was set upon by a group of about 30 pangawielding youths. Though seriously injured, Saunders was saved by a police patrol which passed by. Thusago, who had climbed out of the car to talk to the youths, was not so lucky. His forearm was slashed, opening a major artery. He died through loss of blood in a nearby doctor's surgery one hour later.

The attack galvanised journalists, seething over their recent treatment at the hands of township youths. In the two weeks since the assassination of Chris Hani, 42 journalists had been shot or attacked, some caught in the crossfire but others deliberately targeted.

While the media workers marched through the intermittent rain, thousands of Sharpeville residents gathered at the spot where the television crew's car had been attacked. Some bore hastily-made placards with messages of support for Thusago's family.

Mathata Tsedu, deputy president of the Media Workers' Association of South Africa (MWASA), made an impassioned plea to the Sharpeville community. Gesturing to a nearby police hippo, he said it was through the media that the world had heard about the Sharpeville massacre of 1960.

"We have come here today, escorted by people from Europe, who have come to make sure you don't kill us. There are people here from the OAU, from the European Community and from the local peace committee to make sure you don't kill us. What have we done to you that you are killing us?"

It was the question every journalist was asking.

Statistics gathered by the South African Union of Journalists (SAUJ) show that the trend of attacks against journalists has been increasing steadily since the middle of 1990. ■

In 1991, 13 journalists were injured in attacks. In 1992 the number rose to 46. In the first four months of this year, 60 journalists were shot or attacked.

E Lee Woodyear, human rights officer of the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ), who visited South Africa in April as the guest tutor on a series of safety-training seminars organised by the SAUJ, was shocked at the level of violence against South African journalists.

Woodyear's job involves monitoring censorship and the safety of journalists around the world and he has visited most of the international hotspots where journalists have been killed. But after a few days of listening to South African journalists — and almost every working journalist who participated in the seminars had a horror story to tell of assault or harassment, many describing incidents which could easily have ended tragically — he said he was amazed that more journalists had not been killed.

Journalists have not always been targets in the townships. Before February 1990 the press, and particularly the foreign press, was seen as an ally, informing the outside world of what was happening behind the curtain drawn by the states of emergency. Very often reporters and photographers covering township poli-

tics and the civil disturbances of the 1980s were themselves targets of security force action, leading to a close identification between activists and journalists.

But after the unbannings of political parties in February 1990, the focus of the media changed. Publications which had spent most of their energy opposing the government, started turning a critical eye on the liberation movements which, for the first time, could be covered legally.

At the time it was not uncommon for overly zealous activists to intimidate journalists — particularly black journalists — not to write critically of the liberation movements. However, recent attacks appear to be more a lashing out in anger, often at white faces and those accompanying them, rather than orchestrated violence against the media.

Many attacks against journalists are criminally inspired and have nothing to do with perceptions. Journalists are vulnerable because they go into areas where crime is common and many carry expensive equipment.

But the media have also become a symbol of the establishment and a convenient target for the rising anger of young activists against the slow pace of

negotiations and the concessions apparently being made by their leaders.

A point stressed by both the ANC and the PAC must also be acknowledged — while the ownership and control of media remains in the hands of whites and the media do not reflect the lives and aspirations of the majority, journalists will remain a source of resentment.

The government must also shoulder a share of the blame. After 40 years of strict censorship, where people were told what they could or could not say and read, it is hardly surprising that there is no tradition of free expression and tolerance.

It is ironic to hear the government — these days the most avid supporter of press freedom — piously accusing the liberation movements of responsibility for the death of Calvin Thusago.

But whatever the reason for attacks on journalists, they all have the same effect: they prevent the flow of information. In the wake of Thusago's death, editors are left wondering whether to send journalists back into the Vaal Triangle townships and possibly risking more lives. ●

KAREN STANDER is on the national executive of the South African Union of Journalists.

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