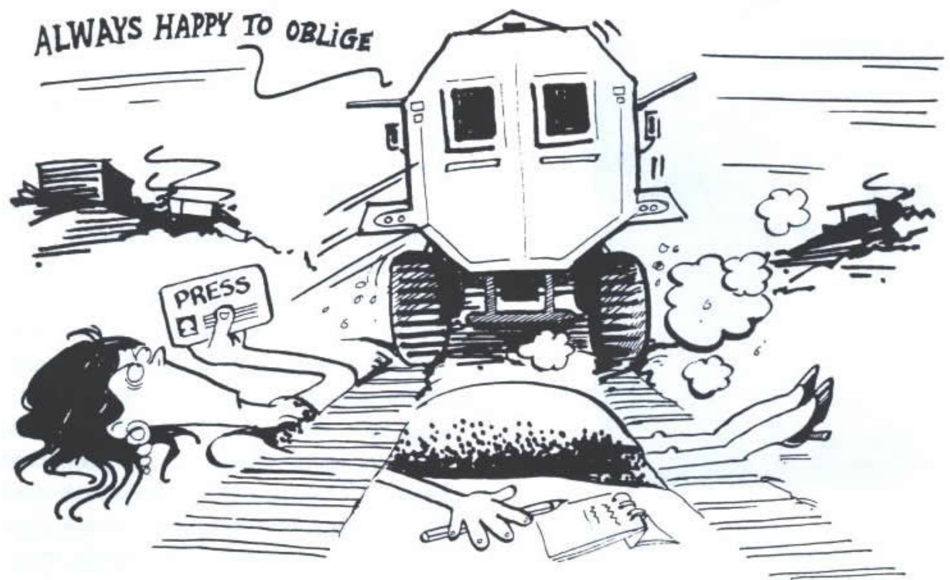

From Belfast to Boipatong

*For BBC Southern Africa correspondent **Fergal Keane**, the fog of war here carries a strong reminder of less sophisticated propaganda in Northern Ireland.*

IN THE 1980s I went to work for the BBC in Northern Ireland. That experience was enriching but also deeply traumatic. It prepared me well for coming to South Africa.

It's strange being an Irishman and reporting Northern Ireland. As strange, I think, as it must be for South Africans covering the trauma of their own country. It's given me a determination not to be prescriptive to people — not to tell South Africans the political solutions because if there was one thing I hated it was Scandinavian academics who would descend on us with these incredibly complex constitutional plans full of sweet reason and objective thought which were, of course, completely alien to the consciousness of Northern Ireland.

Ireland was a good training ground and a good preparation for South Africa. But after a while I began to despair. Ireland is such a small place — it really is quite tiny. As time wore on, each killing seemed to come back at me like a boomerang — and I think if one goes through a dark night of the soul as a journalist, I certainly went through it in Belfast, forever going to funerals, forever going to scenes of killings and places blocked off by white tape which the police put up at the scenes of all disasters. I had this image of the white tape as a metaphor for something which was choking that society.

The worst thing of all was that there was absolutely no sense of movement, of momentum. Nothing was changing. It was a 300-year-old conversation which hadn't changed. A dialogue of the deaf between politicians. No willingness to see one another's point of view.

I sometimes think it would be worthwhile for South Africans to experience that kind of situation because, however bad things are, however traumatic the violence, in the three years I have been here, people have never stopped talking to each other. At the worst of the bloodletting between the ANC and Inkatha and the security forces, there was always a line of communication between the various parties. It may have become strained at times but they still spoke to each other. And that's quite unlike Northern Ireland. It's a very optimistic thing.

So when I got the job of BBC Southern Africa correspondent the sense of momentum was the first thing that struck me. The feeling of the heave of history in a country and the certain knowledge that, however bad things got, however much violence, things were going to change.

But when I did arrive here the violence in the townships was at its worst. The whole question of a third force was very much in the air and the first story I covered which raised a lot of the very fundamental questions on reporting South Africa was the Swanieville massacre at Krugersdorp.

It was quite a stark experience because in Northern Ireland you were generally kept away from the scene of the crime. I recall it was a winter's morning and I can remember driving out along this dust track which leads to the squatter camp and seeing this sight of people streaming against me — old people, young people, little children, carrying all they could on their backs.

These were the refugees who had survived a night of the most unbelievable terror. And as we drove in there were people waving us down and asking us to give them lifts to take them away from that place of desolation. It looked as if a hurricane had swept through it. There were shacks flattened everywhere — fires were still smouldering. The bodies of the people who had been murdered only a few hours before were still scattered on the ground.

I witnessed this extraordinary South African image of watching policemen sitting in a casspir laughing and joking to themselves, seemingly a million miles away from the situation, while on the ground there were people in the most distracted states of grief.

So we walked around and spoke to people and generally felt the kind of helplessness you feel when confronted with something you are powerless to change. And yet, because we were white journalists, these people invested a hope — a disproportionate hope that we could somehow change their immediate circumstances, that we could sort out their problems with the police, that we could sort out their problems with Inkatha who had carried out the attack. We couldn't. I stood there numb recording what people were saying and generally feeling pretty useless.

On the way out, we gave a lift to a young couple and their two children who were trying to escape the carnage and we took them to Dobsonville in Soweto. I have this memory of driving up this dirt track and looking into the mirror and seeing these people's faces in the mirror — frozen in fear and desperation. ➢

I thought when I was working in Northern Ireland that they had pretty sophisticated lying machines in operation on all sides. But they had nothing compared to what I have experienced here.

● This article is an edited version of a talk delivered during the National Arts Festival. Illustrations by Nicky Taylor from *Surviving the Story: a safety manual for journalists in South Africa* — a SAUJ publication.

Swanieville was significant for me in that it exposed a lot of the difficulties in covering South African stories. The welter of claims and counter-claims which you get from everybody. You have this sort of fog of war — propaganda put out in that particular case by the police and Inkatha.

While going around the township I was told there had been white men among the attackers. The difficulty was (and I have had this experience many, many times — particularly in the Boipatong massacres) that when you went down and did an almost detective-like job on it, talking to people and asking, "What exactly did they look like? Who were they? How many?" it very often transpired that it wasn't the person themselves who had seen the whites. But they always knew somebody maybe two streets away who had seen them.

So I had a difficulty reporting that because the moment I put something like "residents say there were white men among the attackers" on the BBC, it would be automatically believed amongst the audience.

And that was my difficulty in reporting the whole question of the third force conspiracy. I had to decide whether it was a conspiracy or a blend of crass incompetence and negligence. And at the end of the day I still am no nearer a judgment on that.

In the end, because so many people had said it to us and so many of the stories seemed to tie up, I did put in the line, but there was a moment of soul-searching.

As it transpired what did happen was that police, some of them in plain clothes, arrived towards the end of the attack and people had assumed they were part of the onslaught.

I thought when I was working in Northern Ireland that they had pretty sophisticated lying machines in operation on all sides. But they had nothing compared to what I have experienced here. In any given incident, if you're not there yourself, you're left wrestling with, on average, at least four different versions of what actually happened — you have the government version, the police version, the ANC version and the Inkatha version. Trying to cut through that and find the objective truth is a huge difficulty.

The pressure of delivering on that day a precise explanation of what happened and a fair one, is sometimes too great and we end up two or three days later being able to tell the truth. But, of course, that's no good because the general impression has been given in most people's minds. They hear what they hear on the day and that is taken as the truth.

Shortly after Swanieville, there was another event which, in a different way, exposed the difficulties of working in this country. This had to do with a very different part of the political spectrum — the incident at Goedgevonden in the Western Transvaal where a number of right-wingers opened fire on squatters occupying some land.

When we got there we were told that the police, a short time before we arrived, had opened fire on the right-wingers. But to try and get every side of the story, we spoke to the squatters first. And then moved into a field which was filled with distinctly unpleasant gentlemen in khaki — heavily armed — and with an attitude problem.

I was slithering around the field trying to look as small as I could and splattering out my few pathetic words of Afrikaans: "Ek is van Radio Ierland, meneer" — not the BBC because that's deeply loathed by them because of memories of the Boer War. So one farmer said to me: "You're from Ireland?" I said: "Yes". And he said, "Catholic Irish or Protestant Irish?" And I said to myself, "this I do not believe. I left all this behind me on the Shankall and Falls Road. Give me a break." I realised that this could be one of those questions that could be fundamental to your life whichever way you answer. As my grandmother in faraway Cork used to say "When in doubt tell the truth". So I said "Catholic". "What?" "Catholic." "Great," he replied, "Up the IRA."

I had moment of despair there. But the exchange showed something about the sort of psychosis operating in that particular field at the time.

It got even nastier because people were shoving shotguns in our chests and, in the end, they chased us away and it became impossible, and still is to a large extent, to report the activities of people who are deeply suspicious of you and who regard you as an enemy. Who, when you tell them you are trying to do a fair and objective job, don't really want to know about that.

In recent times, I have experienced this intolerance a lot on the left of the political

spectrum in certain townships east of Johannesburg where we have been physically attacked and accused of being sell-outs and stooges of the regime.

You find yourself covering marches and demonstrations and having someone come up to you and say: "Settler, settler. Bullet, bullet." And that's not really the time to start explaining that you actually come from Ireland which has experienced 700 years of colonial oppression. It doesn't really strike a chord with people who are angry. I can't blame somebody in Sebokeng or Katlahong who's been screwed all her life by white people for regarding white reporters as an enemy. And, in the heat of battle, it is not really the time to start explaining that you are there trying to do a fair and objective job of reporting.

That reporting is becoming increasingly difficult. As a foreign correspondent in this country I constantly have to interest the news desk in London at a time when the continent of Africa itself is heavily marginalised. People don't really want to know.

One of the principal difficulties facing European broadcasters like myself and the people who work for the German or Dutch radio stations, is that Europe now has a vicious war on its own doorstep in Yugoslavia. There's a general sense I detect too, every time I go back — not weariness with South Africa just yet — but getting there. But certainly a weariness for the continent of Africa as a place of troubles and never-ending sorrow and agony.

Without wishing to seem too blunt, some news editors give me the impression of being bored with the problems of Africa. Now for you who must live through the trauma of what is happening here and, indeed, with the agony of the African continent, that may seem a bit harsh and a bit cynical but that, unfortunately, is the way it is.

South Africa is dangerous in a way that Bosnia isn't anymore. In places like Bosnia and Northern Ireland, where I worked before, you can be pretty sure which is the safe side to be on. How to protect yourself. But believe you me, if you are driving through either Crossroads outside Cape Town, or Sebokeng, or Katlahong or Thokoza during the week, there is no safe place. The front line changes every few minutes.

In one case we were standing on a corner trying to interview somebody when a sniper opened fire. That kind of thing I don't remember happening when I first covered situations of unrest in this country. Certainly not the degree of hostility which is directed towards journalists.

So you end up unfortunately, reaching a situation where there are certain parts of the story which become inaccessible to you and the obvious place that springs to mind is the Vaal Triangle, the crucible of the unrest in 1984. But now large parts of it are no longer safe for journalists to travel in. A curtain of darkness has come down and it's possible for people on all sides to do the most brutal things and to get away with them in the secure knowledge that the journalists won't be there.

You go to political organisations and speak to them about this and they promise to protect you. But in fairness, they are not in a position to make promises because, once the violence starts in an area, the degree of suspicion and of hostility aimed at outsiders who, for generations, have done nothing but bring trouble into townships is excessive.

I am not sure what the answer is. I hope we will not be forced into a situation where we either ignore large parts of the story or end up dependent on the word of eye-witnesses.

But I detect a worrying drift in that direction and I wonder what will happen once we get the heightened state of tension which will surround an election. It is mandatory now that we wear flak jackets in the township. You kind of ask yourself, "What way is this to work and live?" We are now thinking of using armoured vehicles — we are going to do the job of reporting like soldiers.

Having whinged on about how awful it is, let me say again that it is also a fantastic, brilliantly entertaining story to cover because there is, as I said at the outset, this great sense of momentum, of things changing. Overall, I think, given the fact that you have had 350 years or more of racial supremacy and the most appalling cruelty here my reporting reflects my continuing amazement that people talk to each other. That people are willing to negotiate. This is an astonishing achievement. ●

It is mandatory now that we wear flak jackets in the township. You kind of ask yourself, "What way is this to work and live?" We are now thinking of using armoured vehicles — we are going to do the job of reporting like soldiers.