

Shack dwellers' struggle is not over

Apartheid may be over, but the poor in South Africa are asking for support in the new battle to be truly free

I WISH to extend our deepest gratitude to the anti-apartheid movement here in New Zealand who stood firm with the people of South Africa in the fight against apartheid.

Many of our older comrades remember watching, on TV, the protests that you organised against the Springbok tour in 1981. There were thousands of you, many thousands of you. You were attacked by the police. Many of you were beaten and arrested. Your protests were a deep shock to the racists in South Africa.

It made them realise that although Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher accepted their racism, ordinary people in New Zealand did not. Your protests also gave courage to the people struggling against apartheid in South Africa.

Abahlali also notes, with great pleasure, the refusal of the Govan Mbeki Award from the government of South Africa by John Minto in solidarity with Abahlali baseMjondolo and all other struggling poor people's movements in South Africa.

This was a powerful gesture, a gesture of great integrity and a gesture which we celebrated. We were honoured to welcome John Minto to our country, to our city and to the Kennedy Road shack settlement. The Poor People's Alliance salutes John Minto's profound integrity.

But today you will hear how your struggle here for freedom in South Africa has been betrayed to free some few individuals and not the people of South Africa. Since the end of apartheid the rich have got richer and the poor have got poorer.

Many politicians and their families have become rich. But the politicians that rose to power on a people's struggle have become new oppressors in the name of a democratic state. Your efforts, just like other people's efforts around the world, just like the efforts of people in South Africa for a free and just country, have been reduced to lousy service delivery.

Our first democratic election in 1994 brought hope for millions of South Africans. Of course the shack dwellers had high hopes that housing would



By S'bu Zikode

be a basic human right. In his first State of the Nation address Nelson Mandela proclaimed the right to housing and committed his government to build housing for the poor, through the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP).

A remarkable number of houses have been built but they have been built very poorly, they are very small, and they are built far away from cities. The houses built by the ANC are smaller and further away from the cities than the houses built by apartheid. When allocated they are given to friends, family members of local councillors and comrades of the ruling party.

Houses and other development go to party supporters so that the party can exploit poverty to win votes and remain in power.

Land has not been fairly redistributed. The economy continues to exclude and to exploit. Millions are without work and millions are working but still poor and without security. Most of the land and the economy remains in the hands of rich whites. They have been joined by some rich blacks but the poor, the majority, remain locked out.

The great change we have seen over the past 17 years has been the change from a white government to a black government but this black government is not a government of the people. It is led by a few wealthy individuals who continue to enrich themselves in the name of democracy.

Corruption in governance has become the norm. Politics has become a new economic path and a career for the young members of the ruling party. Politics means access to tenders, access to wealth and control.

Politics is not about serving the people. We had thought that the new government would replace a system of exclusion and inequality with a



Auckland artists protest outside Eden Park rugby stadium during the third Test on September 12, 1981. The writer says the protest gave courage to the people struggling against apartheid in South Africa.

just society. But what they have actually done is to simply take their place in that system of exclusion and inequality. They have not tried to transform that system.

We are told that now that the system is under black management we are free. We have refused to accept this. When the government celebrates Freedom Day in the stadiums every year we mourn unFreedom Day in the shacks.

Millions of people remain in shacks. In fact the number of shacks is growing.

Shack dwellers live like pigs in the mud, with rats, in homes that leak in the rain and are often in flames. People are burnt to death in shack fires because we are denied electricity and have to use candles and gas stoves. But when we connect ourselves to electricity the municipalities

come with guns to disconnect us. Sometimes shack dwellers are treated like children. Sometimes we are treated like criminals. We are rarely treated as citizens.

The housing backlog was 1.5 million in 1994. It now stands at approximately 2.1 million. That means that approximately 12 million South Africans are still in need of decent shelter. The number of shack settlements in South Africa has grown from 300 in 1994 to 2 600 in 2011. This is unfair in a state that claims to be democratic.

Most shack dwellers are black. This is unfair in a state that claims to have liberated black people.

These shack settlements lack basic services. There is often no sanitation and very little access to water. There is no electricity, no road access and

no refuse collection. Those in power do not consult when making decisions. There are very few jobs and government jobs are given to party members, friends or family members. The poor are living under constant threat of eviction. In these evictions some are left homeless and others are forcibly removed to human dumping grounds outside the cities. No one can say that this is freedom.

Abahlali baseMjondolo, the shack dwellers' movement, realised that politicians can no longer be trusted. It was clear that our government has betrayed us; that the political leadership that we most trusted has betrayed the poor. It was at this stage that we began organising ourselves as shack dwellers, unemployed people and farm dwellers. It is on the basis of this that

Abahlali was formed to fight for, protect, promote and advance the interests and the dignity of all the shack dwellers and other poor people in South Africa. We are a movement of the poor, for the poor and by the poor.

Abahlali has refused to accept that the poor should be passive receivers of services. We have refused to be locked in poverty. We have refused to sit quietly while clever people discuss our future without our presence. We have refused to know our place in the important discussions.

We have refused to keep to our place in the shacks and in poverty. Yes, we have refused to be treated with disrespect and indignity. Our politics is very simple – we believe that everyone has the same right to shape the future of our cities and our country and that the

land and wealth of the country should be shared equally by the people of the country.

Our everyday struggle has confirmed how strong we have become when thinking together, walking together and resisting evictions together.

Our struggle has threatened politicians, the state, businesses, the regressive Left and some academics and some civil society organisations who think it is their job to think for the poor and to represent the poor. It has become clear that there is no political will to respect and accept shack dwellers as human beings who can think by both the state and some civil society organisations. Our movement is committed to campaign for a society in which every human being counts the same.

We see a society in which each person counts as one, in

which all people are treated the same, as a normal society.

Our movement has fought many battles and won many victories. We have stopped many evictions in our cities. We have fought against transit camps. We have fought for the electrification of shacks in Durban. We have fought the Slums Act. We have fought against the criminalisation of shack activists. We have fought to defend the right of shack intellectuals to be able to think and discuss with all other intellectuals. And of course we have fought to keep the spirit of Abahlalism alive. We have faced serious repression – arrests, beatings and the destruction of our homes – but our movement has survived.

While we remain in our shacks we are proud of our struggle and we will continue to confront all forms of exclusion and oppression.

Today we are appealing once again to all New Zealanders to stand in solidarity with the shack dwellers' movement Abahlali baseMjondolo, to stand in solidarity with all the poor people's movements in South Africa – the Anti-Eviction Campaign, the Rural Network, the Landless Peoples Movement and the Unemployed Peoples Movement.

At a deep level all our struggles are the same. We are all trying to insist that every person is a person, to build the power of the poor and to reimagine how power can work in our societies. We are all trying to humanise the world.

The struggle in South Africa, like in so many countries in the world, is far from over. But people are struggling all over the world. The struggle for human dignity remains at large in South Africa and in the world. Hope remains at large in South Africa and in the world.

● S'bu Zikode, the head of the Durban-based Abahlali baseMjondolo Movement, was a guest speaker at a Global, Peace and Justice event in Auckland to mark the 30th anniversary of the 1981 protests against the Springboks' tour of New Zealand on Monday. This is an edited version of his speech.

We need a common agenda and agreement on paying for it

IF YOU listen to the debates that South Africans, across race and class, are pre-occupied with at the moment you would think this country and its economy are a self-contained island. Yet, we are part of the global economy that is characterised by much uncertainty.

"The world is collectively suffering from a crisis of confidence, in the face of deteriorating economic outlook and rising concerns about the health of sovereigns and banks," IMF managing director Christine Lagarde said in London last week.

"All this is happening at a time when the scope for policy action is considerably narrower than when the crisis first erupted."



By Jabulani Sikhakhane

South Africa may be better off than most industrialised countries. Our banking system, as Finance Minister Pravin Gordhan reminded bankers last month, has remained "resilient in the face of volatility and turbulence in the global market".

Gordhan cautioned that recent developments in Europe and the US had dampened the nascent growth in the global economy and had

created "greater uncertainty" about the economic recovery.

Unlike the dial-a-quote analysts, finance ministers must walk a careful path between words of caution about dangers ahead and the need to stoke confidence in the hope of limiting, if not avoiding, the impact of those dangers. So that is as good a word of caution as you will ever get from the finance minister.

Even before Gordhan's words of caution, South Africans have been obsessed with matters peripheral to their collective survival and prosperity.

Whatever the composition, each segment of our society is looking after its own narrow interest. Under ordinary circumstances that

should be expected. But these are no ordinary times.

On top of the huge social and economic backlogs that relate to our past which has been compounded by the failure of successive ANC administrations to build an effective state machinery, South Africa, like the rest of the globe, faces the prospect of economic turbulence. The combination of the backlogs and the coming turbulence calls for a collective girding of the loins.

But if there is any girding, it is each segment fighting for, or defending, its sectoral interests. Take Cosatu for example. The federation will this month launch its campaign for a living wage, which

involves marches throughout the country.

The temptation is great to dismiss Cosatu's campaign as ill-advised. But the reality is such that each of the segments in our society has different pressure points. Take the cost of living and how we measure it. Employers and policy-makers use headline inflation.

But as the UK's Institute of Fiscal Studies points out in a recent paper, there are substantial variations in how households allocate their budgets across different types of goods and services, both over time and between different demographic and income groups. Also, the rate of price inflation for different goods and services can also

vary dramatically. "This means that different households can face very different inflation rates. Households spending a large portion of their budget on items that are rising rapidly in price will have higher inflation than households spending a smaller share on these items," says the Institute of Fiscal Studies.

"The headline rates of inflation measure the average rate of inflation in the economy and may or may not reflect any particular household's individual inflation rate."

The use of the average inflation rate as the base for wage settlements, says the Institute of Fiscal Studies, means that households

facing inflation rates above or below the average rate will find themselves being under- or over-compensated for the impact of changes in prices.

It is precisely because of these different pressure points that South Africans must agree as a matter of urgency on a common agenda, but most importantly they need to agree on how the costs associated with that common agenda will be split.

All segments must take their fair share of the pain. Workers cannot be expected to take the pain when bosses are paying themselves exorbitant salaries and bonuses. That is not how to build social cohesion and a common future.

Crocodile tears

WHAT kind of ill luck and heartache can cause a man to abandon his crocodile? Staff at Warsaw Zoo found a four-foot crocodile on their doorstep in a crate with a note: "My name is Gustav. I am a crocodile. My daddy loves me very much, but I need a new home."

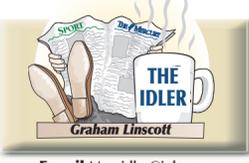
However, the zoo are having none of it. They say they don't have enough room for Gustav and they're searching their CCTV footage to try to identify the man who dumped him and dump him back again.

It's so sad that, just as he enters his impressionable teenage years, an innocent founding crocodile should be subjected to this kind of rejection and emotional turmoil.

Maybe the Polish courts will step in and find Gustav a foster home.

Deon du Plessis

I AM SADDENED to learn of the death of my old friend and



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colleague Deon du Plessis. Deon was a giant of the South African newspaper world, both physically – a huge man – and metaphorically.

I worked with him on the old Argus Africa News Service, a highly professional outfit with a network across the continent and staffers based in Joburg, Salisbury (as it then was), Dar es Salaam, Nairobi and Accra. Our main focus in those days was the withdrawal of the Portuguese from Angola and Mozambique and the chaos that ensued. Also the resulting pressure

on Ian Smith's Rhodesia and the collapse of UDI.

Deon was very much part of that scramble coverage. He went on to hold various executive positions in the old Argus company and its successor, Independent Newspapers, but he always hankered after launching a robust tabloid.

This he achieved when he broke away to launch The Daily Sun, which is a huge success nationwide. Its content is not to everyone's taste, but Deon's instinct was sound. There is a basic demand for a newspaper that caters to the tastes and interests of that vast category of people who have urbanised but not quite lost touch with their rural and traditional values. The Daily Sun focuses on that market. The reports it publishes are vivid, frequently bizarre and often seemingly outrageous. And it sells.

A few years ago I hired a house painter. He arrived every day with a



Members of the Brotherhood of the Brewers' Mashstaff carry a barrel of beer outside St Gudule Cathedral in Brussels, during celebrations honouring St Arnould, patron saint of brewers. PICTURE: REUTERS

copy of The Daily Sun under his arm. Then he would ask our domestic lady to translate the content into Zulu for him. That's what I call a committed reader – brand loyalty. He bought the paper for its content, even though he

couldn't read (or for that matter speak) English. Deon was larger than life. He often projected himself – I presume for his own private amusement – as some kind of clodhopping backveld. Nothing could have

been further from the truth. He was astute, finely attuned to every nuance of politics and of the newspaper world.

He was also delightful company, treating everything he did as an adventure, whether some journalistic sortie or one of the convivial lunches he so often presided over. He will be missed by all of us who worked with him.

Tangled telexes

THE DRAMA of life as a foreign correspondent. There was a time when I was on the desk of the Africa Service, in Joburg. Deon du Plessis was in Lourenço Marques (as present-day Maputo was then called) in Mozambique.

There was no such thing as e-mail. The communications technology of those days was the telex and the landline machine for photographs.

Things were popping in Mozambique. Deon desperately needed a landline machine. One was available from the Cape Argus. By telex I negotiated for this machine to be railed to LM. The

Argus informed me by telex that it was on its way.

What I didn't know was that a manager on The Star had arranged for the Argus to rail him a crate of smoked snoek for a company function.

Yes, you've guessed. The Star manager got a landline machine. Deon got a crate of smoked snoek. Next thing a lady from head office was haring across to Komatipoort by car to hand over the landline machine at the border post.

I hope Deon enjoyed the smoked snoek.

Tailpiece

A TRUCK carrying copies of Roget's Thesaurus overturned on the highway. Onlookers were stunned, overwhelmed, astonished, bewildered and dumbfounded.

Last word

I HAVE opinions of my own – strong opinions – but I don't always agree with them. – George W Bush