

## PUBLIC STATEMENT

### **South Africa: Combatting a state of terror and impunity in Richmond, KwaZulu Natal**

Amnesty International welcomes recent government initiatives which are helping to bring some security to the communities of Richmond, terrified by a wave of politically-motivated killings apparently linked to the control over territory and local government resources. The organization remains concerned, however, that the lives of residents are still at risk until those responsible for scores of killings since May 1997 are arrested and brought to justice.

The pattern and the manner of the killings, particularly during July, strongly suggests that a militarily-trained "death squad" is operating in the area. In the most recent attack, during the night of 28 July, nine members of the Shezi family including four young children were shot dead at close range by gunmen using high velocity rifles. They were killed in their home at Esimozomeni outside Richmond despite high profile visits to the area by national government officials and the deployment of several hundred police and soldiers in the wake of previous massacres in July.

The killers have to date been able to act with complete impunity. Residents from the various communities in the Richmond area are living in fear. Many of them don't trust the local police and are sceptical of their impartiality and efficiency. Amnesty International is gravely concerned that almost no-one has been brought to justice for any of the scores of assassinations and other political killings that have taken place in the Richmond area since Transitional Local Council member, Rodney van der Bijl, was shot dead outside his home in May 1997. There are indications that police investigations have been poorly done and vital evidence needed to help establish linkages between incidents is reportedly missing from the case dockets. Witnesses have been too afraid to co-operate with a process they can not trust.

An Amnesty International representative learned during a visit to Richmond that, in the hours after the 3 July 1998 massacre of eight people including the deputy mayor, Percy Thompson, no police officers were deployed to increase security at the home of the mayor, Andrew Ragavaloo, whose life has been under constant threat. Yet, at the same time, more than a dozen police vehicles were seen parked outside the police station. The victims died on 3 July when gunmen opened fire on patrons at a local tavern not far from the police station. A white Toyota "bakkie" with a distinguishing red stripe, which was seen near the tavern at the time of the massacre, was later seen moving about near the Mayor's house apparently keeping it under surveillance. This vehicle is still reported being seen outside the homes of other targeted individuals. These failures by local police to provide prompt and necessary security to those under threat have only served to fuel suspicions about their intentions.

In the aftermath of the 28 July massacre in the Esimozomeni area, the residents of this rural community fled their homes. Along with hundreds of others from other Richmond communities such as Ndaleni and Magoda, they are sleeping in the nearby forests or in halls and clinics out of fear of attacks on their homes.

The national government responded to the tavern massacre by ordering the deployment to Richmond of South African National Defence Force (SANDF) soldiers and detachments of non-local police to mount patrols, road blocks and house-to-house searches for weapons. However the effectiveness of this initiative may have been obstructed initially by a lack of over-all coordination and control, as well as by certain local factors such as the absence of street lighting in the affected areas. The profound dark into which the impoverished townships were plunged every night, the lack of telephones, proper roads and other infrastructure have facilitated the activities of the killers, hampered effective security force patrols, including foot-patrols, and left the residents of Ndaleni, Magoda and Esimozomeni vulnerable and afraid. Amnesty International's representative visiting Richmond in early July was informed that efforts to install floodlights in the townships were being held up by the provincial government's failure to release funds.

Following further execution-style killings, the national government at the end of July increased the deployment of security forces to some 800 soldiers and police, including a company of soldiers with capacity for mobility in difficult terrain. On 29 July, after the intervention of President Nelson Mandela, powerful lights on 40-metre high masts began to be installed in Ndaleni and Magoda, but are still needed in Esimozomeni.

The vital task of tackling the longstanding failure of the police and the prosecution service to bring the perpetrators of the killings to account has begun. The Minister of Safety and Security, Mr F S Mufamadi, and others are trying to establish a credible, impartial and efficient investigation team led by and composed mainly of non-local police detectives. Amnesty International is not aware of any significant arrests yet made by this team, but reportedly a number of warrants of arrest have been issued. It is crucial also that appropriate steps are taken to ensure the safety of witnesses.

The statutory body, the Independent Complaints Directorate (ICD), is investigating allegations of police direct and indirect complicity in the killings. Forensic pathologists, also, have now been drawn into the investigation of the massacre of the Shezi family on 28 July. Proper coordination and cooperation between all of these investigatory bodies will be important if the killers are to be brought to justice.

Amnesty International hopes that these initiatives will begin to mitigate the climate of terror and impunity prevailing in the Richmond area. Improvements in the security situation for residents may then allow the representatives of political parties, including the African National Congress (ANC), the United Democratic Movement (UDM) and the Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP), to meet and identify ways of improving possibilities for free political activity in the months prior to the 1999 general elections.

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