

Silent acquiescence in daily terror

Contributed by PARATUS
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South Africa is experiencing extraordinary levels of violent crime. Since the country's democratic transition in 1994, some 300,000 South Africans have been murdered. Much of this crime is unprecedented in its brutality and is directed at the elderly and the young. Bizarrely, much of the Western media are silent about the calamity which has befallen South Africa. Is this an intentional oversight to avoid accusations of racism or denigrating one of the few African democracies? Or, are the Western media – and, by implication, its consumers – disinterested in accounts of murder and bloodshed far removed on the southern tip of a forgotten continent? Marinda O'Dell was a compassionate and hardworking occupational therapist at a school for disabled children in Krugersdorp, an hour's drive north west of Johannesburg. In early August, two young men entered her house just after lunchtime, bludgeoned her 17-year-old daughter unconscious, and cut Marinda's throat. Marinda became one of the 50 people murdered on an average day in South Africa. Last month, Cobi Venter, a dedicated anti-apartheid campaigner, and her husband George, an 78-year-old entrepreneur, were brutally murdered in their middle-class suburban home in Port Elizabeth. Six men forced their way into the Venter's home, which had been barricaded after a previous robbery attempt. George was struck several times with a hammer, tortured and dragged by his feet from room to room, and then killed. After witnessing the terrifying events, Cobi was gang-raped and fatally beaten to death. According to the Venter's son: "Blood was on the walls of every single room in the house; it was on the ceilings. It was like evil just exploded there – I mean, all eight of the main windows were smashed as well." Veteran policemen cried at the scene. More than ten years ago, Anne Paton, the wife of the celebrated late anti-apartheid author, Alan Paton, fled South Africa in terror. A number of her friends had been murdered, and she was almost killed by two robbers who throttled and assaulted the then 70-year-old as she was enjoying an afternoon nap. Realizing that the government was unwilling to protect its taxpayers and citizens, she finally left South Africa. At the time, she wrote:

"I love this country with a passion, but I cannot live here any more. I can no longer live slung about with panic buttons and gear locks. I am tired of driving with my car windows closed and the doors locked, tired of being afraid of stopping at red lights. I am tired of being constantly on the alert, having that sudden frisson of fear at the sight of a shadow by the gate, of a group of youths approaching – although nine times out of 10 they are innocent of harmful intent. Such is the suspicion that dogs us all..."

While some people say I have been unlucky, others say: "You are lucky not to have been raped or murdered." What kind of a society is this where one is considered "lucky" not to have been raped or murdered – yet? While difficult to believe, it appears that the level of brutality employed by criminals is on the rise in South Africa. Deputy national police commissioner, Andre Pruis, recently announced an investigation into the excessively violent nature of crime in the country. Especially at risk are the elderly and the young. According to official South African Police Service (SAPS) figures, in 2007/08 (the latest 12-month period for which data have been released) an average of 30 children were murdered every week. During a typical year, as many children are murdered in South Africa as the number of all people murdered in both the United Kingdom and Germany, notwithstanding the fact that the latter two countries have a combined population of 141 million, compared to 48 million in South Africa. The risk of being murdered in South Africa today is almost six times as high as in the United States. Compared to the United Kingdom, the risk is 19 times higher, while the risk is an incredible 40 times higher than in Germany. Sexual crimes are also at intolerably high levels in South Africa. Gang-rape and the rape of toddlers and even infants has become a common occurrence. Only countries at war suffer as much sexual violence as South Africa, Doctors Without Borders said in March in a global report on rape. According to the SAPS, children are the victims of 41 percent of all rapes and attempted rapes reported in the country; approximately 60 a day. Over 15 percent of all reported rapes are against children under 11, and another 26 percent against children 12-17 years. Given that a large proportion of all violent crime – but sexual offences in particular – go unreported, the true figures are likely to be substantially higher. A bizarre belief among some African black men that sex with a virgin can cure HIV/AIDS is further fuelling the high levels of child sexual exploitation in South Africa. According to Max Coleman's authoritative book, "A crime against humanity: Analysing repression of the Apartheid State", published by the South African Human Rights Committee, 21,000 people died in political violence in South Africa during apartheid. Included in Coleman's figures are deaths due to SA Defence Force actions in Angola, security force action in South Africa, and intra-black (or "black-on-black") killings. Since the end of apartheid in 1994, over 300,000 people have been murdered in South Africa. To put this horrifying number into perspective, it is sobering to recall that the United Kingdom suffered 383,000 military deaths during World War II, after years of intense fighting across France, Germany, and the Mediterranean basin. An epidemic of criminal violence has afflicted South Africa since its first non-racial franchise in 1994. Yet, as one astute observer points out: "This story has been largely ignored by the mainstream media in the United States and the Western world, in order to perpetuate the Mandela myth of the wonderful New South Africa." Why are the Western media largely silent about South Africa's crime wave? Is it for fear of being thought "racist", notwithstanding the fact that most victims of violent crime in South Africa are black? Is it for fear of blemishing the miracle of South Africa's (relatively) peaceful transition to democracy, having to admit that the value of reconciliation on which the "rainbow nation" was built has given way to mistrust and animosity? Whatever the reason, the Western media is doing its consumers a disservice by ignoring the tidal wave of violent crime which has engulfed South Africa. "My child has been murdered; he lies in the room at the back and there is blood." With these words

the father of the 29-year-old Gericke Smit, an attorney, had to report his son's death to an ex-policeman. Gericke was killed in Pietersburg last month by two men who battered him to death, striking him across the head with shovels more than 18 times. Every day — every hour, even — men, women, and children in South Africa are being murdered in their homes. They share the faces, the names, the broader history of the best in the West. When will this daily terror be reported in the daily news of the West?