

The Ciskei bus boycott and the railway station shootings: 1983²¹

- 151 On 18 July 1983, a boycott of the partly government-owned Ciskei Transport Corporation (CTC) buses started in Mdantsane, Ciskei, in protest at an 11 per cent fare increase. The boycott lasted several years and involved shooting of and assaults on commuters by the Ciskei security forces backed up by vigilantes, in attempts to force commuters to use the buses.
- 152 The Commission received numerous statements in connection with violence that broke out during the bus boycott; many of those who made statements were also heard at the hearing at Mdantsane in June 1997.
- 153 When the boycott started, commuters initially walked to work in large groups, from Mdantsane across the Ciskei border to East London, a distance of about twenty kilometres. These groups effectively became mass demonstrations against the bus company. Later, more use was made of private taxis and trains.
- 154 Within days, the boycott elicited a violent response from Ciskei authorities. Security forces and vigilantes set up roadblocks in Mdantsane, and there were reports of commuters being hauled out of taxis and ordered onto buses. On 22 July 1983, five people were shot and wounded by Ciskei security forces at the Fort Jackson railway station. On 30 July, a man was attacked and killed by vigilantes while walking near the Mdantsane stadium, used by vigilantes as a base. On 3 August, a state of emergency was declared in Mdantsane and a night curfew imposed. Meetings of more than four people were banned and people were prohibited from walking in groups larger than four. The following day Ciskei forces opened fire on commuters at three Mdantsane railway stations.
- 155 In the dark early winter morning of Thursday 4 August, Mdantsane commuters started walking up the small hill to the railway line that ran alongside Mdantsane and the three stations of Fort Jackson, Egerton and Mount Ruth that served the township. The state of emergency had been declared the evening before and the first nightly curfew had just ended at 04:00. Many commuters were probably still unaware of the emergency or the curfew. They were met at each station by a human blockade of armed police and soldiers, supported by vigilantes armed with sticks and *sjamboks* (whips). The security forces apparently had one aim: to get the commuters back onto the buses. Within an hour, commuters had been shot at all three railway stations.

21 See Fink Haysom, Ruling with the whip: Report on the violation of human rights in the Ciskei. Johannesburg: Centre for Applied Legal Studies (CALS), October 1983; Institute for Planning Research, An investigation into the Mdantsane/East London bus boycott. University of Port Elizabeth, April 1984 and contemporary newspaper accounts.

156 Ms Valencia Ntombiyakhe Madlityane [EC2091/97ELN] said she was shot by soldiers at Mount Ruth station at about 05h00 after she ignored police orders to use a bus instead of the train. At least three people died in the incident. At 04h20 union employee Ms Kholeka Dlutu²² heard shooting at Egerton where commuters also died. Shooting was also reported at Fort Jackson, where some injuries were reported. All in all, "at least six commuters died and dozens were injured"²³. The fact that shooting happened at more than one station points to a co-ordinated security force operation with orders to stop commuters from catching the trains at all costs. While police later claimed they were attacked, attempts to prosecute commuters for such attacks failed and it seems unlikely there would have been similar attacks at all three stations at the same time."

157 Ms Kholeka Dlutu said she heard shooting and went with her aunt to see what was happening. Ms Dlutu stated in an *affidavit*:

Somewhere near the church nearby a corner house, on the way to Egerton Railway Station, we came across a girl who was bleeding from the thigh and screaming. She alleged that she had been shot by the police ... We proceeded and saw many people in an open veld standing opposite Egerton Station, and a smaller group of people, some wearing brown overalls and some wearing other police or army uniform, standing on the opposite side nearer the station. The two groups were facing each other. Whenever the commuters moved towards the station, the other group, to whom I shall collectively refer as the police, would advance as if to meet the first group halfway, causing the commuters to retreat, some of whom ran into residential yards.

At that stage, visibility was poor, but the action described above went on for so long that the light gradually improved. Meanwhile, some of the commuters were managing to escape and reach the railway line by taking devious routes and crossing the railway line. Later, when the police advanced once more, the commuters did not run but shouted out that they were not at war with the police and only wanted to get to the railway station so as to board trains to East London.

²² *Affidavit* by Kholeka Dlutu on 4/8/83 in Boqwana *et al v Ciskei Minister of Justice et al* case 494/83, Zwelitsha court.

²³ The Commission was able to trace the names of six people who died in this incident. They were: Lawrence Vukile Cecane, Nyanisile Alton Vusani, Julia Ndaliso, Goodman Toko, Fuzile Caza and Mncedisi Elliot Sidwadwa. A memorial at Egerton station lists 11 dead: five of the six identified by the Commission, plus one (Zenzeze Mpiyake) who was killed on 30 July by vigilantes, two who died in separate incidents on 6 August (Sisa Faku and Michael Mbila) and three others: Khaya Mbange, Clifford Soxokashe and a Mr Mayile. While the memorial includes at least three people who died in other incidents during the boycott, three children of a Ciskei government supporter who were fatally injured when their home was petrol-bombed on 3 August (Daniel, Priscilla and Vuyiswa Ndlovu) are not included on the memorial.