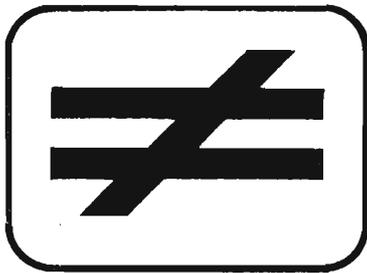


PC 11/11/13/17



PSYCHOLOGICAL EFFECTS



OF DETENTION

PACSA FACTSHEET

17



There are currently (February 1984) 45 people detained in solitary confinement in South Africa under the government's security legislation. At least 11 of these people are being held in or around Pietermaritzburg under Section 29 of the Internal Security Act. For more details of this Section see Factsheet No. 15 - 'Detainees and Security Legislation.'

This factsheet will describe some effects of detention, particularly in solitary confinement or isolation.

ISOLATION AND THE HUMAN MIND

'Eskimos never walk alone because the sheer monotony of their snowy landscapes could unbalance their minds. That is why human beings should not be kept in solitary confinement.' This is the view of the Professor of Psychology at the Rand Afrikaans University - Charl Vorster. He believes that the monotony and lack of stimulation may cause severe psychological disturbance. "Solitary confinement is a most severe mental torture. It is at the same level as the giving of electric shocks or other physical torture - it is just that it appears more innocent."

Members of the Department of Psychology at the University of Cape Town stated that detention without trial is a form of control by terror and posed the question: "Since there are strong grounds for believing that detention without trial has serious harmful effects, can we accept, without proof to the contrary, the Minister's assurance that detainees are humanely treated?"

Solitary confinement could be technically described in terms of 'sensory' or 'perceptual deprivation.' This means a person is placed in a monotonous environment where nothing changes and where there are no incoming stimuli to break the monotony. Professor Vorster states that if confinement is kept up, the person loses contact with reality and becomes totally disorientated and exhibits symptoms found in a person with psychosis - disturbance of the mind-such as high levels of anxiety, panic, delusions.

Dr Louis West, a professor of psychology and world authority on the effects of detention and solitary confinement, visited South Africa in 1982. In an interview in Pietermaritzburg he spoke on what he terms the DDD Syndrome (Debility, Dread, Dependence) which is the state to which detainees are reduced by the very nature of solitary confinement. "It does not take physical torture to reduce a person to a state where he/she will do anything you require. To use these means you must either be stupid or sadistic - (solitary confinement is sufficient)."

The ad hoc committee of the Medical Association of South Africa has concluded that the circumstances relating to the detention of security law detainees in South Africa present potential hazards to their physical and mental health. The committee states that at present there is no satisfactory statutory regulation of the medical care of detainees and prisoners.

PACSA

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PSYCHOLOGICAL EFFECTS OF DETENTION

According to Dr West the 3D's Syndrome is likely to be induced in anyone kept in isolation. In South Africa there is information available from former detainees, State admissions, court proceedings and actual court judgements, to indicate that security law detainees are subjected to isolation, confinement and more.

DEBILITY

This refers to a decrease of physical and emotional resistance, and arises as the detainee is physically worn down. This may be done through physical abuse, inadequate diet, loss of muscle strength through inactivity or overwork. Deprivation of sleep is one of the ways in which a person is rapidly worn down. Dr West said "...we don't know why chronic sleep deprivation is so successful in disorienting people...(they) begin to hallucinate, develop illusions, distort reality...The damage done is certainly physical but it doesn't show a scar and there is no evidence."

DREAD

This develops from a person's mental deterioration. There is the fear of being isolated for an unknown period (wondering whether anyone knows where one is), fear of pain if one is subjected to sadistic interrogation. (These feelings of anxiety, fear and terror are more pronounced during periods between interrogation sessions). But says West, "As long as one has hope one will experience fear."

DEPENDENCE

A detainee's relationship with his captors develops into a child/parent one. The detainee is utterly dependent on them for life and death, for health and comfort, and for companionship. Such a person in becoming childlike wants to please his captors and thus begins to identify with them. In such a state a detainee becomes more susceptible to persuasion and propaganda.

"...Solitary confinement combined with interrogation may cause the subject to become confused and uncertain of his facts and to doubt himself and his recollections. He may become suggestible and strongly subject to the influence of his interrogator who can make suggestions to him directly or indirectly, sometimes without being aware of it. In his state of confusion and impaired mental powers he may abandon his original reconstruction of events and substitute one to please his interrogator. Thereafter the detainee may believe the second reconstruction to be true and for this reason his demeanour may be no guide to his credibility."

Albino & Matthews (S.A. Law Journal 1966).

The following extract is taken from an ex-detainee's affidavit submitted to a Magistrate's Court (SOUTH AFRICAN OUTLOOK, January 1975):

*"I was detained alone and without communication for 5½ months.
I was only allowed out of my cell for limited periods.
I found that my ability to organise my thoughts and to concentrate on certain subjects was deteriorating.
I had difficulty in remembering aspects of my past.
I have never in my life felt so crushed by loneliness and mental anguish such as I experienced in isolation.
The horror of uncontrolled thoughts and fears over months and months was for me a worse punishment, sensed not only as unendurable pain, but as the slow destruction of myself as a human being."*

A CHRISTIAN RESPONSE

- * Pray for all detainees and their goalers. In particular pray for the 11 detained in Pietermaritzburg and their families.
- * Write to the Medical Association of South Africa calling on them to ask their regional committees to consult with the respective District Surgeons as to the wellbeing of detainees in their regions.