

South Africa polluted by more than just apartheid, poverty and intolerance

By Margaret L. Knox

JOHANNESBURG, SOUTH AFRICA

SOUTH AFRICA'S BRUTAL CONTRASTS ARE stamped as vividly on the earth as on the people. The rolling emerald fields of prosperous white farmers give way in a wink to "homeland" landscapes as scraped of vegetation as any in rural Africa. The manicured lawns and swimming pools of suburban Johannesburg lie within a few minutes' drive of a smoke-choked urban sprawl reminiscent of industrial Poland. Try to phone a government agency that coordinates enforcement of environmental laws and you'll find out that South Africa doesn't have one.

With the industrial pollution of a First World economy, the poverty-related environmental degradation of a Third World economy and the iron fist of emergency rule, South Africa is an environmentalist's worst nightmare. South Africa, however, has few environmentalists. Those inclined to take up the Earth's cause admit that fighting apartheid takes all their political energy. The few who organize against pollution are harassed by a government notorious for its harsh intolerance of dissent.

The industrial juggernaut that fuels what the government calls the "most advanced economy on the continent" also pours nearly every imaginable toxic compound into the ecosystem. Gold processing requires cyanide, coal burning creates sulfur dioxide, steel production leaves lead pollutants. And with the economy slipping deeper into crisis each year, the government is fearful of enforcing laws that might disadvantage industry. Disinvestment and the trade deficit have lost South Africa nearly \$8 billion over the last three years—an amount greater than an entire year's production of gold.

The future doesn't look much brighter. South Africa's \$21 billion foreign debt equals almost one-third its 1987 gross national product. The financial crunch is so bad and the environment is of such little concern that when the tiny African nation of Guinea rejected a load of toxic waste last year, the South African business magazine *Financial Mail* urged the government to "seize the opportunity" in hazardous-waste disposal as a new source of foreign income.

Dirty politics: South Africa's air-pollution problem is most acute in the crowded townships where urban blacks are required to live. Because township homes rarely have electricity or gas, residents breathe not only the industrial pollutants their neighbors share, they also inhale the acrid smoke of their own coal stoves and heaters. More than half of South Africa's 23 million blacks, though, have been forced onto the 12 percent of land South Africa set aside as reserves—the so-called homelands, or bantustans.

"It's been a long time since the reserves could support their populations," says Dave Cooper of the European-donor sponsored Environmental Development Agency in Johannesburg. "But that's how the bantustans are supposed to work, to force people to find employment off the land." The government forced too many people onto marginal land; too many trees were cut for fuel, and the topsoil blew away. The western reserves have turned to desert; the moister eastern reserves are ravaged by periodic floods. Ag-

riculture generates only 10 percent of income in the bantustans, says Cooper, and fewer than 5 percent of the people can live from agriculture alone. A deliberate policy of land wastage has kept blacks sleeping in bantustans but dependent on jobs in the white cities.

"It is accepted government policy that these bantu [blacks] are only temporarily residents in European areas of the republic for as long as they offer their labor there," says a 1967 government circular. "As soon as they become, for some reason or another, no longer fit for work or superfluous in the labor market, they are expected to return to the country of origin or the territory of the national unit where they fit in ethnically if they were not born and bred in the homelands."

Because of this, most bantustan residents work around towns like Witbank, the heart of South Africa's industrial colossus 60 miles east of Johannesburg. The Witbank region is home to 12 of the world's biggest power plants, which generate 80 percent of South Africa's electricity from coal.

One 24-square-mile patch of power plants, petrochemical factories and foundries in the Witbank area churns out 3,700 tons of sulfur dioxide a year, according to a study prepared for the government's National Programme for Weather, Climate and Atmosphere research. That concentration rivals the infamous facade-corroding smogs of Krakow, Poland, where sulfuric acid in the air has worn nearly featureless the once starkly chiseled gargoyles on medieval buildings.

Inconclusive: Statistics, however, are difficult to come by in South Africa. Few studies have been published on the effects of pollution on human health, and most of them are about white schoolchildren in industrial areas. A 1987 study of Witbank-area schoolchildren by the University of Witwatersrand found them to be exceptionally prone to asthma, chest colds, coughing and wheezing. Children in the Vaal Triangle area—South Africa's second industrial hub—surveyed by Pretoria University in 1986 showed reduced lung function. Martin Lloyd, the government's chief air-pollution control officer, dismisses both health studies as "inconclusive."

"People don't want to see or smell pollution; South Africa is especially bad with visual pollution," says Lloyd. "But we feel that it's not a health problem; it's just a nuisance, so why should we spend money on just a nuisance?"

Lloyd blames an easy scapegoat—sanctions. "We're a developing country with limited funds, facing boycotts," he says, adding that water-intensive scrubbers used in other countries to control sulfur emissions would be "too much to ask" of companies operating in the dry highveld around Johannesburg.

Lloyd also blames apartheid's victims, saying, "The black townships are the worst polluters."

Even if Lloyd wanted to crack down, he would have a hard time doing it. The Department of Health and Population Development has only 10 anti-pollution workers on staff. Standards are more lenient than in the U.S. And even when violations are found, the government has no power to fine offenders.

The people who suffer the brunt of South

Africa's pollution problems cannot vote or safely protest and are rarely included in any study. Lloyd says an environmental health study is planned for Soweto, the black township that with 4 million residents is southern Africa's biggest city. In most townships, overcrowding, poor sewage removal, leaky shacks and dirt floors are more obvious threats to health than a smelter or a mine up the road.

"If you ask me, I'll say I don't like it," says Molefi Mohola, a 25-year-old hairdresser who lives in Soweto. "But we don't think much about coal smoke. We've got too much else on our minds." The African National Congress (ANC), which hopes one day to inherit the country, also concedes that it is too busy fighting apartheid to worry about the environment.

"In the bantustans, 50 percent of the children die before the age of five," says Victor Mashabela, a staff member at the ANC mission to the United Nations in New York. "The burning issues of immediate life and death have preoccupied us. Personally, I care about whales, but how much can you think about the environment when you're wondering where you'll find your next meal? I'm afraid the little you hear about the environment has been coming from the white community."

Because of this, the environmental struggle has fallen to people like Jenny Mufford, a white housewife who is untrained, unfunded, unconnected and avowedly apolitical. Mufford, a mother of two, founded Women Against Acid Rain, a 300-member advocacy group for clean air. Mufford founded the group after her husband was transferred six years ago to a refinery in the Vaal Triangle. Since then, she says, her family has suffered constant bronchial and sinus ailments. Two years ago they all came down with hepatitis. Last year, when she lost a six-month-old baby, the government's General Hospital in Johannesburg refused to perform an autopsy or tell the cause of death. When Mufford asked to see the file, she was told all records had been "misplaced."

Like Mufford, most members of Women Against Acid Rain are homemakers whose husbands work in the factories that surround their homes. Unlike their black countrymen in the township beyond the local slag heap, they can afford cortisones, medical inhalers,

antihistamines, and even oxygen tents when winter inversions trap foul air and bring on health crises. But most of them can't afford to move away.

Although Mufford says she could move, she no longer wants to. "Doctors say if you want your children to get better, move out of the area," she says. "But I won't. Every morning I wake up and see this muck, and I'm reminded to continue to strive. I also think about the black people pushed out to the homelands, trying to make themselves comfortable on land that's been denuded. You can't just push people out like that."

White noise: Such talk makes the government nervous. The same bullying techniques used against anti-apartheid activists have been turned against anti-pollution activists. "If you make too much noise about things and you're in business, they'll ostracize you," says the owner of a company that sells pol-

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lution-control equipment and who feared government harassment if identified. "If you're not born here, they'll kick you out. This is not, I'm discovering, anything like a free society—even for whites."

Kat Channing-Pearce, the Natal farmer's wife who founded Chemwatch, leaked a government agriculture department report and soon after received visits from agents of the National Intelligence Service. "They wanted to know whether I was involved in Greenpeace, whether I was a member or had corresponded with them," Channing-Pearce says. When Natal Environmental Network Chairwoman Molly Kudla carried a placard that said "Ban hormonal herbicides" at a hall where the deputy minister of agriculture was speaking, the South African police detained her for questioning and told her the action was illegal under the state of emergency.

"That's way beyond the bounds of the Emergency," says Anton Harber, editor of the 25,000-circulation *Weekly Mail* newspaper. "People just assume that under the emergency everything is against the law. And of course the state tries to convey that."

Conservative South African whites say Americans must stop seeing their country's problems in simple black and white, because there are many shades of gray. Perhaps they are referring to the skies over Witbank and the Vaal Triangle, the townships' coal-smoke shrouds and the overgrazed dust bowls of the bantustans.

Margaret Knox reported on southern Africa from Zimbabwe for nearly three years. She recently moved to Missoula, Mont.

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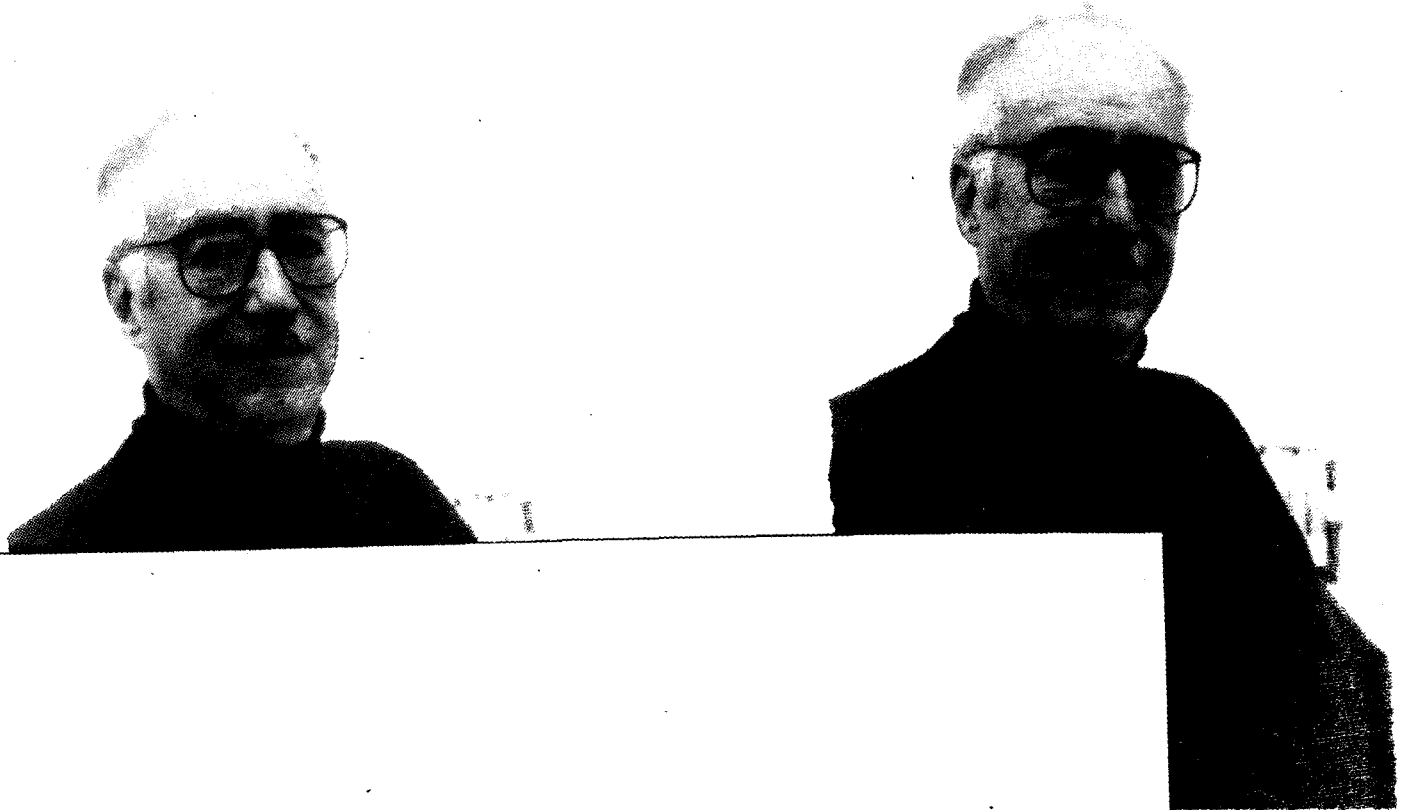
The last years of the '80s brought explosive political changes in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, and a depressing continuity in the domestic policies of our country. The Cold War, which has dominated American politics as the ideological glue of corporate social priorities for 40 years, is over. But those in charge in Washington still cling desperately to the military economy, substituting the War on Drugs -- and on Central America -- for the Evil Empire.

While the Bush administration escalates its militarization of Latin America and sends American troops to seize the leader of a sovereign nation, the media cheers it on. The unanimity with which television and newspaper commentators parroted administration lies about the situation in Panama was infuriating but not surprising. Journalists working in the corporate media are either unwilling or unable to live up to the claims of an allegedly free press.

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Once upon a time,
 there lived a girl
 named Rosie Scenario...



WASSERMAN
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Bush's proposed budget betrays his public trust

"The peace dividend," administration leaders say, "is peace," and President Bush's proposed 1991 budget offers nothing more. In fact, as the recent invasion of Panama portended, even "peace" has been limited by George Bush to mean only the absence of global war. For if we were to take the meaning of the budget from the priorities its numbers imply, "peace" would not mean an end to military involvement in the Third World or to international tensions outside of Europe. Nor would it mean social peace and the development of a more humane society at home. In fact, it would not even mean the end of the threat of nuclear war. On its face, the president's budget indicates only a recognition that land war in Europe is no longer on the list of rationales for a militarized economy. Beyond that, all the Reagan-era priorities remain intact (see story on page 3).

Overall, the administration wants to spend \$5.3 billion more on arms in 1991 than in 1990, while it proposes to cut \$18.5 billion from Medicare and farm subsidies. There is a slight increase in spending for education in the Bush plan—some \$1.2 billion—but as we noted two weeks ago, the Council on Economic Priorities estimates that the government must spend an additional \$20 billion a year just to bring us up to the average spending on primary and secondary education of the 15 leading industrialized nations. Spending on food stamps would increase at less than the rate of inflation, and child-nutrition programs would be cut by \$150 million dollars. Despite the housing crisis and the flood of homeless people on our streets, spending on housing would be cut and subsidies for AMTRAK eliminated. But not to worry, our kinder and gentler president proposes an increase of \$2.1 billion in spending for NASA—about 15 percent—so that we can send some astronauts back to the moon.

National defense needs: A government that increases military spending cannot also increase social spending without increasing either taxes or the federal deficit. No one in Washington would propose increasing the deficit, and the president has made it politically impossible to increase income taxes—even while sneaking regressive excise taxes in here and there. But, as the Center for Defense Information (CDI) argues, our national defense does not depend on a massive military establishment. As long as the Soviet Union retains the ability to destroy us with nuclear weapons, they say, we must retain a retaliatory force to deter an attack by a future Soviet ruler. But such a defense posture would allow us to reduce our military spending by one-third without endangering security. That would mean a savings of \$100 billion a year, and it would allow us to cut

the deficit while substantially increasing spending for education, housing, rebuilding our infrastructure and other social needs. Such spending would do more to strengthen the nation than throwing billions of dollars at the military, CDI suggests.

Yet the Bush administration, still toeing the Reagan line, continues to obscure the truth about defense and the deficit. Budget Director Richard Darman maintains that continued international threats warrant increased spending on Star Wars missile defense and other new weapons like the Stealth bomber. Indeed, the cuts that are proposed in military spending are almost all for personnel and base closings, while the giant arms corporations are given generous increases.

Not surprisingly, this is a class-biased budget. But it is one designed by an extremely short-sighted and greedy sector of our ruling class. As Duke University political scientist James David Barber recently pointed out, George Bush is an aristocrat who acts to advance the interests of "the rich and powerful." The president wards off "the challenge of real democracy, not by damning the people (at least in public) but by confusing them," Barber says. He comes across as a "strong advocate of uplifting education and the environment and the homeless," but, in fact, he advances only the "welfare of the rich." Bush "sweeps aside history and planning in favor of immediate wheeling and dealing," Barber argues. He surrounds himself with "assistant managers to grab the present" while "advocating values that his actions undercut, such as a 'kinder gentler America.'"

The administration's 1991 budget and the rationales presented for it by Bush seem to use Barber as a blueprint. It is the budget of an administration with greater loyalty to military contractors—the big ones—than to the American people, and with a rapacious eye on the present and a blind eye to the future.

And it is also a budget brilliantly designed to confuse the opposition in Congress, which it does by creating a brawl over the proposed closing of dozens of military bases in congressional districts with Democratic representatives. Rep. Patricia Schroeder (D-CO), who heads the Armed Services Subcommittee on Military Installations, calls this "an unbalanced partisan hit list." Her figures show that 19 of the 21 bases under consideration for closing are in Democratic districts, as are 99 percent of the civilian jobs that would be cut if the proposals are carried out. As everyone knows, such a list will generate frantic efforts among House members to save jobs in their districts, thereby diverting attention away from the more important issues raised by Bush's proposals.