INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

RACE, CRIME AND TOURISM IN DURBAN: THE SINGAPORE OF AFRICA

83 St. Regis
40 Smith Street
Durban 4001
South Africa
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Peter Bird Martin
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Dear Peter,

Kunjani (How are things?) Ngiyaphila. (I am well.) On Valentine's Day I start Zulu language classes at the University of Natal, Durban, which means that six months from now I should know more than a few salutations. In the meantime, I'm settling into my new surroundings, trying to figure what's what and who's who. I hope you won't mind the informality of my first newsletter from South Africa. Title notwithstanding, it is mostly a compilation of my observations and feelings, which rise and fall as dramatically as the rolling hills I viewed from the window of the airplane that brought me here.

Durban is located on South Africa's east coast in KwaZulu-Natal, one of nine new provinces that came into existence following the April elections. It is South Africa's third largest city and boasts the biggest and busiest port in Africa, ranked ninth in the world. It is "Africa's Singapore," prime to carve a niche in the world's transshipment market, so said a recent business story in The Natal Mercury, a local daily.

The city was once part of Zulu king Shaka's empire. The British established a trading post here in 1824, and the first settlers believed that a land grant obtained from Shaka gave them ownership of the land. Shaka considered them governors of the area and subject to his supreme authority. The confusion about who owned what was common between whites and blacks in the 19th century. Land issues are even more confusing today.

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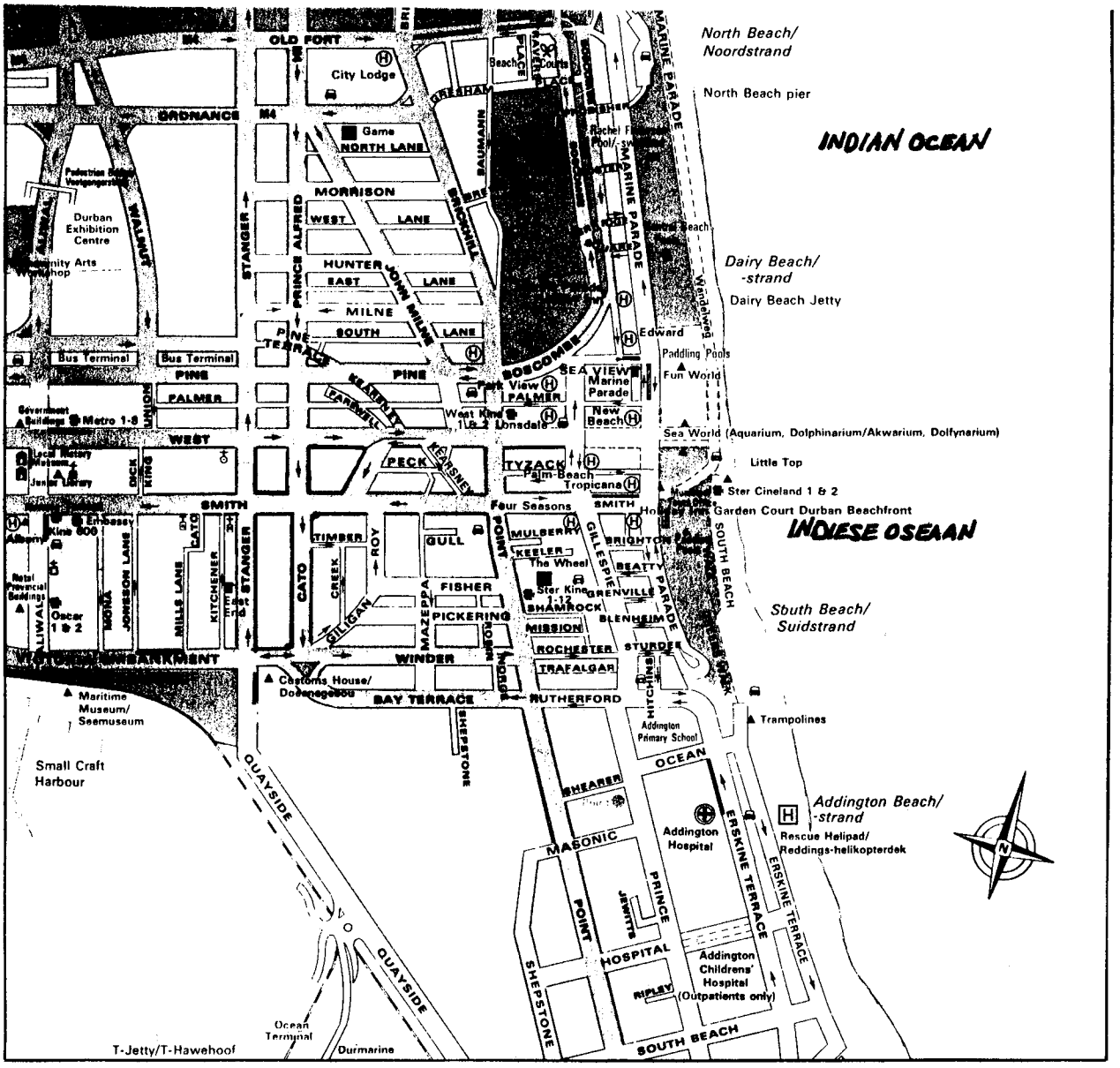
CENTRAL DURBAN



West and Smith are the city's two main streets. The former leads towards the beach front: the latter, away. I live on Smith Street where it intersects with Point Road, which links the city and harbor. Smith Street is considered the oldest street name in Durban and takes its name after Thomas Charlton Smith, the officer in charge of troops during an 1842 siege in which Boer forces attacked the British, whose military forces occupied Durban in 1838. Today, Smith Street is primarily dominated by car dealerships, banks, business houses, retail stores, mom-n-pop restaurants, and escort and adult entertainment services.

On the side of Smith Street opposite where I live is a high-rise apartment building integrated with blacks, whites, Indians and coloureds. The building is not in great shape. I see broken windows, sagging mattresses leaning against doors, tattered curtains trying to escape with the occasional sea breeze, and big blotches of paint peeling off the side of the building.

Still, it's better than living on the streets. Around the corner on Point Road is a park meant for children but occupied by dozens of black men and women who apparently have no place to live. It is a filthy park, littered with trash, broken glass, rusted grocery store shopping carts. A policeman sits atop a watch tower directly in front of the park. I suppose he's there to make sure the people in the park don't cross to the other side of the road, where there are lots of tourists and people with money going inside The Wheel, a shopping mall with more than 130 stores and 12 cinemas. Security guards stationed at entrances to the mall keep watch as shoppers pass through what looks like a security checkpoint at an airport.

The people in the park are not the only ones without housing. There are dozens of Zimbabwe women who sell baskets, lace tablecloths, and trinkets to tourists along the beach walk. When night falls they cover their crafts with big black garbage bags and sleep beside their possessions. Estimates of the number of illegal immigrants in South Africa range from three to 12 million, with most from Mozambique, Zimbabwe and other southern African states.

Street level, my apartment faces L.H. Maharaj Centre, which sells, among other things, what is popularly known as bunny chow. Bunny chow is a spicy hot curry served in hollowed-out bread. For 3 rand, which is less than $1, you can buy a quarter loaf filled with vegetable curry so hot it'll make your nose run. Maharaj Centre is neighbor to City Housewives Market, seller of fruits and vegetables, and City Housewives is neighbor to Nina's Escort Service. Chicken Lickin,' open till midnight, and Tong Lok Chinese take-away are also visible from my eighth floor apartment. They're located across Point Road.

Quiet time never comes to my South Beach neighborhood. Cars screech, horns honk, police sirens blare, people shout and music thumps, day and night. Weekdays, starting at about 4 p.m., taxi van drivers compete with one another to lure commuters by honking their horns. A majority of the commuters live in townships outside Durban. In one way, the honking reminds me of factory whistles that blow at 5 o'clock to signal the close of a work day. Except, here the competition among taxi drivers occasionally gets dangerous and when that happens I think of the honking as more of an alarm. Just last week, some commuters were left stranded on the side of a road after one driver got into a fight with another driver.

Durban prides itself on a rich blend of people and culture. Blacks have lived here many centuries more than anybody else, most tracing their origins to the Nguni people. Indians were brought here as laborers to work on sugar and banana plantations; the first shipload arrived in 1860. They came mainly from the southern areas of the Deccan Peninsula and were mostly Hindus. Today, they own many businesses in Durban. I buy newspapers from a young, clean-cut Indian man in a market around the corner on Point Road. He arrives at work at 6:30 a.m. and leaves at 11 p.m. When he leaves at 11, he travels to the suburb of Chatsworth, where he helps close down a second family market. (The former apartheid government created Chatsworth for Indians starting in 1959 and today more than 163,000 people abide in the densely populated area.) He says that in five years the family expects to own the two businesses outright. They bought the one on Point Road just six months ago. I'm told that some blacks resent the entrepreneurial Indians, whose ancestors came here to work in the fields when the Zulu people refused. But I'm also told that relations between the two groups are improving. These days Indians girls and black boys even date, an occurrence apparently unheard of a mere three years ago.

The coloured people here are from different origins. Some of the earliest ones were the product of English and Nguni unions. They also came from St. Helena and Mauritius and later on from the Cape and the Transkei. Durban also has a minute number of Chinese, who settled and prospered here along with the Parsees, descendants of Persians. Also living here are descendants of liberated slaves from Zanzibar. No one knows what to make of me. Some speculate that I'm Indian. Others guess coloured. When anyone asks, I say I'm an American here on a writing/study fellowship. They generally look confused, wondering how to rephrase the question, but then drop it.

Race matters here, very much so. My apartment building, St. Regis, is occupied almost entirely by "Europeans." European is the term my landlady and some other, mostly older, whites I have met use to describe themselves. Though, they've lived here since birth. As far as I am able to determine, an Indian woman lives in the building, along with two coloured couples. However, no black people reside here other than myself. The only black people I have seen or spoken to in the building are the three aging black custodians who polish 10 flights of stairs on their hands and knees. It is not by coincidence that black South Africans do not reside at St. Regis; it is by design.

I unwittingly came to live in this largely segregated building after reading a classified advertisement in a newspaper. When I dialed the telephone number listed in the advertisement, I got CLS, a computerized leasing service. CLS charges 120 rand ($35) for the actual telephone numbers to apartments.

I visited the CLS office and registered to receive the computerized apartment listing. However, before I could make a call an agent picked up a telephone, called a realtor's office and gave me directions to the office. It was through the real estate agency that I found the bachelor flat at St. Regis, which happens to be owned by an agent who works for the real estate agency.

My landlady is a tall, lanky white woman in her late 50s. She believes that "the blacks" have "a nature of their own" and says so without the slightest hesitancy. When she talks, I sometimes feel as if I'm listening in on a private conversation that I should not hear. I am attentive, with guilt. The irony is I know her better than she knows herself. I often know what she's going to say before she says it. That's because I've heard it all before; except, usually "the blacks" referred to the likes of me.

The Thursday my landlady and I met, her hands ached. Her cleaning woman, whose township house burned to the ground, was away indefinitely, which meant my landlady had to clean her own bachelor flat, "something I'm just not used to," she said. While she longed for her cleaning woman to return, she also lamented that "the natives" have a lower standard of cleanliness than Europeans, an observation I found particularly curious given the extent to which whites so thoroughly depend on blacks to clean. Indeed, I'm usually surrounded by black cleaning women on the public bus that I ride from the city center to the University of Natal campus, which is situated among posh homes with exquisite landscaping.

The morning I moved into St. Regis my landlady treated me to tea and scones at a nearby restaurant. She told me "I have to be honest. Before the elections, most whites hated the blacks." She blamed the National Party for introducing apartheid. "That ruined everything," she said. Before then, the whites and blacks got along fine. True enough, the blacks didn't live as well as whites and they didn't have proper schools, but everyone got along, she said. Her memories of growing up in the Transvaal are precious.

I asked her how white's attitudes have changed since the election. "We all realized change had to come," she said, answering but not answering. My landlady is pleasant and helpful. She pats down the collar of my blouse to make sure I am neat and tidy and cautions me "never you mind" the foul-mouthed supervisor. "He's Greek," she said. "All they care about is playing cards till early in the morning." My landlady doesn't fathom the depth of her own racist views. She is like an alcoholic who does not believe that he or she is a drunk. And denial precludes the need for change.

I met a 28-year-old writer from Detroit who moved here two years ago with her boyfriend. She is white, he is Indian. They live together. She has not met his family because he doesn't want them to know she is white. Ironically, she said she thought her parents would not accept him, given their anger when her sister brought home a black boyfriend. But her parents liked him, and she said she couldn't have guessed that the problem would arise with his family. She shrugged and took a drag off a cigarette as she related the situation. Her body language gave the impression that it was no big deal; she could handle it. But she didn't convince me. She had a reason for telling me her story. Maybe she told me because it's easy to tell strangers our deepest hurts. Or, maybe it's because she thought that I have experienced rejection based on race and know how to soothe the pain. If the latter was the case, I failed her because I know of no such salve.

Neo is a 27-year-old Tswana speaker working towards a master's degree in history at the University of Natal, Durban. He says he tries hard not to stereotype people based on race. Indeed, it is the hardest lesson he must learn. Before the semester starts at the university, he will travel to an area outside Pretoria to visit his mother and other relatives. His family once lived 15 minutes from Pretoria, but the government removed them from the land years ago. Where they live now is an hour away. Neo, who wears his hair in "baby dreads," as in the short version of dreadlocks, says he gets upset each time he passes the place. He says he tries to understand the whites who live there, seemingly without remorse. He often imagines what his life might have been had he lived closer to the city, had he attended better schools. The way Neo talked, I thought the land dispossession occurred during his childhood. As it turned out, he never lived on the land. He was born there, but the removal happened shortly after his birth. He carries the heartache of his parents; their dispossession became his.

Neo's talking reminded me of my most treasured story about my late grandfather, Claude, a North Carolina farmer and carpenter. My grandfather loved his land; it was evidence of his striving. Decades before my birth, he lost possession of part of his land to a crooked white man, so the story goes. When a court ruled against my grandfather, he decided that the man might get the land, but he would not allow him to take possession of the new house he was building for his wife and 12 children. So on a pitch-black country night, he and his children took down the house, plank-by-plank. And when people came to view the land to possibly buy it, he shooed them away, saying, "that's my land."

Eventually, my grandfather regained his land. As a girl, I liked to prance up and down on the two concrete steps that remained as a testament to the house that once lived there. On occasions when I have needed to muster the strength of conviction, I recall the story of my grandfather's house.

In no way would I attempt to diminish the wrong committed against Neo's family but I suggested to him that maybe he should reconstruct the family's original home place, but not with bricks and mortar. Instead, construct it word-by-word, building a historical record. That way, at the very least, his 3-year-old niece will have a foundation on which to prance up and down.

Alongside the main post office, opposite City Hall, is the Church Street Arts and Crafts Market. Vendors are there seven days a week. One booth catches my eye each time I pass because the vendor sells T-shirts that say, "Welcome to South Africa. Now Go Home." Tourists and tourism are considered critical to future development in Durban and the nation. Both local and national newspapers almost always carry at least one story about tourism in their daily editions. One recent story detailed how the South African Tourism Board plans to hire unemployed youth between the ages of 18 and 25 to protect tourists. "Tourist protection officers" is the proposed title for the workers. I read the story in disbelief, thinking they can't be serious. Why would international travelers bother to visit a place that requires the protection of bodyguards?

In Soweto, businessman David Moshapalo has figured out a way to make money off squatter camps. He's banking on the idea that curious overseas travelers will pay money to spend a night in a squatter's shack. Soweto is "saleable," he said in The City Press newspaper. "Most of our political leaders come from or are based in this township." What might tourists expect -sleeping in a dusty, bug-infested room without air-conditioners or heaters, no TV, radio or telephone, plain blankets and a communal toilet. They would wash up at a communal tap outside, where people sometimes line up for hours to brush their teeth or take a public bath.

Even prostitutes are hoping the tourist industry will improve. "Hookers Eyeing the Waterfront" was the headline of a story in Natal on Saturday. "The queens of the read light district believe the tourism boom will create a spin-off for them - fun and sex-seeking foreigners with a lot of money to spend," the newspaper reported. A prostitute interviewed by the story's writer said: "When foreigners visit the Point Waterfront with bursting wallets it's great for us. It's the new South Africa, man. You scratch our backs and we'll massage yours."

If waves of tourists do materialize, prostitutes seem well-positioned to make good on their business promises. Within a three block radius of my apartment building are more than a dozen escort and adult entertainment centers. Not only that but pornographic magazines are sold openly on the streets. When I say openly I mean that the magazines are displayed on city sidewalks, placed in such a way that passers-by almost stumble on them.

The hawkers are always black women. They sit on the hard concrete in the blazing hot sun, trying to eke out a living by selling what seems to be a plethora of "girlie" magazines. The escort service and adult amusement columns in the classified section of local newspapers run three deep, with black and white photographs of women with either cleavage showing or fingers in their mouths. Last but not least, many of the city's trash receptacles advertise "Score" adult gift shop on Smith Street.

Clearly, tourist officials and others are absolutely serious about doing whatever is necessary to attract foreign money. Indeed, I get the impression that tourism is Superman incarnate, capable of creating new jobs, improving living standards, erecting tall buildings, and all at a pace faster than a speeding bullet. My own view is that the South African Tourism Board and Durban Regional Chamber of Commerce should concentrate its efforts on attracting tourists from within South Africa, especially given that for years tourism was inaccessible to all but a privileged few. In other words, tourism, like charity, begins at home. Plus, it seems to me that some South Africans need to practice friendliness among themselves before they endeavor friendliness towards others. Let me give three examples of why I believe they need the practice. I recently walked into a corner store to buy a magazine and the white clerk was friendly and cheerful. When the black man behind me asked for cigarettes, she threw the pack and the man's change on the counter.

My second example is taken from an incident in a self-service laundry where practically no machine works without a swift hit with your fist. A young black man entered with his laundry and the 60-ish white woman working the cash register hassled him because he entered an hour before closing time. Meanwhile, a white couple entered a half an hour before closing, with no problem and no snide comments. At the nearby Tong Lok Chinese take-away a coloured woman taking customer orders addressed a black man as boy. When he said, "don't call me boy," she said, "Zulu boy." I cringe when I hear and see unnecessary rude exchanges and I doubt seriously that other international tourists want to bother with such ugliness.

I also feel strongly that the tourist industry should work doubly hard to ensure that blacks not only sweep up the food and wash clean the dishes left by tourists, but that they manage the restaurants and hotels frequented by travelers. At the Tudor House Hotel on West Street, where I spent my first few days, the owner is white, the woman collecting money at the front desk is Indian and blacks hold the least desirable and lowest paid jobs -cleaning, hauling luggage. It is a work hierarchy that I've seen in numerous -not all- establishments.

Just as another example, there is a black teen-ager working in the Milky Lane ice cream shop near the beach front. I've noticed that she serves customers but she doesn't touch the cash register, even when she's standing right beside it. The money is handled by either a teen-age Indian girl or a twentysomething white woman. My secret hope is that the girl is sacking away money for college. It's the only way to get ahead; I know. I, too, as a 16-year-old once had a job in which I could put shoes on the feet of customers but my dark hands could not touch the cash register. Given South Africa's recent past, I think tourist leaders must not underestimate how essential it is for outsiders to see genuine change in the country. I know I certainly do not want my dollars supporting the status quo. President Nelson Mandela is slated to star in a TV advertisement to promote the country. The advertisement will feature him on a steam train, writing an invitation to the world to visit South Africa. That's all fine and good, but I was taught to clean my house before company comes.

The only subject that seems to get more attention than tourism is crime and violence. Cab drivers gave me my first indications that crime is a serious problem. On the way to the Johannesburg airport to board a plane to Durban, I asked the driver, who looked no more than 25, what he thought of Johannesburg. "It scares me," he said. "Crime is bad." An older man, in his early 30s, drove me from Durban Airport to the Tudor House Hotel. I asked him to tell me about Durban. "Lots of crime," he said. "Be careful." After checking into the hotel, the front clerk -Elaine- asked me to leave my keys at the desk whenever I stepped out. "Why?" I asked. "In case someone knocks you upside the head," she said.

Two hours after checking into the hotel, I walked 10 minutes to The Workshop, a trendy shopping mall, to find a place to have dinner. A boy in his late teens served me curried vegetables and rice, and he sat down to chat for a few minutes. He has lived his entire life in Durban and he said he likes his hometown very much. But when I pressed him to tell me something about the city he said: "You should get back to your hotel before dark. Crime is bad."

My next indication that people are concerned about their safety came when I began searching for an apartment. Each unit I viewed had heavy metal security doors, in addition to regular wood-framed doors. They looked like prison cells rather than residential units. I thought perhaps it was simply a matter of where I had chosen to look for housing, so I visited buildings outside the immediate city center. Still, the buildings and units reminded me of Donovan Prison in Otay Mesa near the U.S.-Mexico border. Here at St. Regis I ride a rickety elevator, with accordion doors that clank loud and hard, to my eighth floor bachelor flat. It takes a few seconds of key twisting to undo the padlock on the heavy-duty security door that safeguards my place and then I use a second key to unlock the deadbolt on the hollow wood door. I feel safe, but from whom and what I don't know.

Thugs cast a shadow on lights project

By CYRIL MADLALA

CRIME and violence are undermining Durban's drive to provide electricity for all its residents.

Themba Ndlazi, an electrical contractor engaged to service 120 000 consumers in Durban's southern region, has had 10 of his 12 trucks hijacked at gunpoint during the past nine months.

The robbers appear unimpressed by the message on his trucks: "We help the community — we bring light to you".

The vehicles, each worth R60 000 and carrying equipment and installation material worth about R30 000, are sometimes found gutted.

The thefts are hampering the city's four-year-old drive to electrify 168 000 homes in the region, which includes the province's biggest township, Umlazi.

Regional manager Alan Gower said this week that contracts were being awarded to black entrepreneurs to do house connections and attend to electrical faults.

"They speak the language, and they understand the situation better in those areas," he said.

But the spate of thefts has meant that only 65 000 homes have been electrified so far.

This month alone three of Mr Ndlazi's vehicles were stolen. He now spends most of his time trying to track them down.

He has also had to negotiate a new insurance deal after the previous company pulled out.

"I am just an ordinary man trying to make a living," Mr Ndlazi said. "My name is clearly marked on the vehicles, so they know it is a black company."

He claims that well-organised syndicates, allegedly involving certain panelbeaters, scrap metal dealers and policemen, are behind the robberies.

On one occasion, he said, he went to a suspect's home to confront him.

"He threatened me with a gun, but later said I could go to a certain police station and get my truck back. I found it there, but no one would tell me how it had ended up at the station after my discussion with the suspect," Mr Ndlazi said.

He has vowed to fight on rather than deprive his 25 employees of incomes.

The security situation for contractors in black areas around Durban has deteriorated to the extent that the South African Federation of Civil Engineering Contractors has warned that the implementation of the Reconstruction and Development Programme is under threat unless the violence is contained immediately.

Hijacking and theft of bakkies and vans was a daily occurrence, with at least one vehicle being stolen every day, it said.

LIGHTING UP ... Themba Ndlazi at work despite the hijackings Picture: RICHARD SHOREY

SUNDAY TIMES, January 29 1995

Anthony Heard, a former newspaper editor here in South Africa, once said that criminal elements "descend on Durban in the July season like flying ants after rain." I wonder what his thoughts might be today, given the daily onslaught of news stories that detail what suggests to me a culture of crime, violence, lawlessness and conflict, not only in Durban and the rest of KwaZulu-Natal but in the country as a whole.

Between January 1 and January 26, 81 people, including 13 children and 5 women, have been killed in KwaZulu-Natal and 48 people have been injured, according to the Human Relations Commission. The deaths and injuries are attributed to both criminal and political violence. An editorial in The Daily News speculated that the surge of killings may be caused by the prospect of local government elections later in the year. It called the killings the "first stirrings in the political equivalent of ethnic cleansing, a process which had become all too dismally familiar in this province over recent years as politicized factions fought for territory and control over the people living in it."

Political violence doesn't explain all. It doesn't explain why close to 400 high school students last week stormed a government education department. The students reportedly trashed offices and held school officials hostage, spitting in the face of one official. What the children wanted was the committee to give immediate attention to problems at their school between teachers and the headmaster.

One muggy afternoon while riding the elevator to my apartment, I encountered a woman in her early 30s who proceeded to tell me that she had just witnessed a European girl standing up to a black girl and "the European girl was winning." She sounded exuberant; I said nothing. Walking down West Street, I once witnessed the driver of a pickup -mad that another driver cut him off- attempt to yank the driver onto the street to fight. A gleeful crowd surrounded, their eyes wide in anticipation of bloodshed. As a former police reporter, nothing frightens me more than a group of people frothing at the mouth for blood, like hyenas waiting for their bite on a fresh kill.

From a distance, things seem tranquil here. I walk up and down Smith and West streets and watch as people carry on their business. Trees get trimmed. Gardens get watered. The library opens and closes on time. Post office lines are orderly. People wait for a green signal before crossing busy intersections. Still, close-up, all is not quite right.

For example, one day a shady-looking character tried to sell me a "hot" camera while I sat on a bench near the beach front, trying to read a newspaper. The more I attempted to ignore him, the more he talked, until finally I folded the paper. He sat down on the bench and proceeded to tell me how hard it is to find work. Not in these exact words, but he also questioned whether he is destined to be what he is, a beggar man and thief. Finally, he stood up and asked once more if I wanted to buy the camera. Then he shocked me. He said, "thanks for listening." My eyes fixed on him -his crusty feet, skinny frame and baggy clown pants- until he walked so far down the beach that he became invisible and everything else in sight appeared tranquil.

Sincerely,

Sharon F. Griffin

Received in Hanover, February 13, 1995.