ON 21 MARCH 1960, 69 people were killed and 180 wounded by police bullets outside Sharpeville police station, near Vereeniging. This massacre proved to be a watershed in the struggle for democracy in South Africa, coming as it did after 12 years of concerted, popular opposition to the Apartheid policies of the Nationalist government. In 1948, the year the Nationalist government came to power, the ANC Youth League had decided to call for a Programme of Action to abolish all unjust laws. This programme would entail national one day strikes, boycotts, protests and other forms of peaceful civil disobedience.

On June 26, 1952, in line with this plan, the ANC and the South African Indian Congress launched the Defiance Campaign. This campaign was aimed against six specific Acts of Parliament which included the Pass Laws, the Group Areas Act, Bantu Authorities Act and the draconian legislation introduced by the Nationalist party, all 186 defendants were acquitted.

In this context, the ANC and the Africanist offshoot, the PAC began an active campaign against the pass laws. Pass laws had long been at the root of the exploitation and oppression of the majority of South Africans. From the beginning, white emergency was declared by the government. Hundreds of people were arrested and detained. Both the ANC and PAC were severely harassed. This culminated in the banning of these organisations on April 8th 1960. Members of these organisations were forced to work underground. Realising the failure of peaceful protest...

On the day of March 21, 1960, Africans were to leave their passes at home and surrender peacefully and voluntarily to the police. On that same day, about 5000 people gathered at the Sharpeville police station to offer themselves for arrest. At 10.20 am, Captain Coetzee of the South African Police...
There can be no peace under Apartheid

A Turning Point

Sharpeville was a turning point in the history of South Africa. The fifties had been a decade of peaceful protest, stay-aways, the burning of passes, petitions. The 1954 Defiance Campaign had seen the African National Congress and South African Indian Congress challenge a programme of civil disobedience, with protests involving breaking what were called the 'unjust laws' and then willingly submitting themselves for arrest.

What the 69 dead on the ground at Sharpeville brought home to the world was the reality of the apartheid system. The state was prepared to resort in any situation to the use of violence to maintain its system.

We have become immunised to violence much more direct and obvious. The horror of the pre-war youth, the violence of the present, all these are aspects of a whole network of laws and institutions which uphold the apartheid system.

There is little doubt as to who is responsible for this violence. For many of us violence is something from which we are removed, of which we have little experience and little knowledge.

There is no peace under Apartheid...
WE REMEMBER SHARPEVILLE...
THE BLOODSHED CONTINUES