focus

South Africa's blacks have displayed remarkable courage in the struggle against the apartheid regime. The cost has already been high – but what of the future?

The last trek?

June 16, 1986 will go down in South Africa's history as the day Europe wrangled about how to seem to be hurting the apartheid regime without actually doing it – while the black townships burnt.

South Africa on that day lived under the shadow of its toughest state of emergency yet, a situation likely to last to its bitter end. Both phrases are peculiar to South African politics. An 'emergency' has in fact existed for decades, despite the smooth image of stability so successfully presented – and it was people calling themselves 'bitter-enders', hard-core Afrikaners, who had refused to accept the 1902 Boer war defeat, determined to wrest victory from the hated English.

They did – in the 1948 elections, from which they created what they and the world came to know as 'apartheid', a racial social and economic system for the benefit of 'whites only' – and the 'English' (english-speaking South Africans) accepted it, just as the West became partners of a system they claim to abhor.

Ten years ago it was schoolchildren who triggered off a revolt against that system. Some 15,000 children set off on a peaceful demonstration in the then unknown Johannesburg dormitory town of Soweto (South Western Townships) to show their objection to their second-class education. They were met by police bullets – and the sullen urban ghettoes erupted.

June 16, 1976 shook the world. In 1960, in another 'location', Sharpeville near Vereeniging, another industrial Transvaal town, a similar round of police bullets had killed 69 people who with millions of others had protested against the humiliation of the pass laws. Apartheid made world headlines for the first time.

But the world's horror, white opposition, black bravery was met with brutality. A state of emergency was declared then as now. Thousands were arrested, black parties banned, new security laws introduced, many white liberals emigrated and capital temporarily fled.

An uneasy calm followed, broken by strikes in the early 70s which in turn led to some reforms in labour relations. But the conflagrations of 1960 and 1976 were simply open manifestations of the reality – South Africa's permanent state of instability and the endemic explosive nature of its social system.

The so-called Botha-led reforms which resulted in a complex new constitution in 1983, introduced in the following year, finally exploded the myth of stability. Since the pomp and ceremony of September 1984 which had taken place against 'township unrest', South Africa has never been out of the headlines and death never out of the township streets.

President Pieter Willem Botha, umpiring an uneasy match between white hardliners and 'moderates', continued to tinker with social engineering. But the time had long passed when the abolition of pass laws – as happened during May this year – opening restaurant doors to all-comers or adding another body to a three-tier parliamentary structure had any meaning for the black majority.

They wanted apartheid dead – in every sense of the word. They had proved they would die in the attempt. Some 1,500 people have been killed in the 22 months since September 1984: by police/army action, by township – and indeed rural – Africans turning on puppets and collaborators of the system, by vigilantes paid and incited by the authorities.

Whites too have died – two (and an Indian) on the eve of the anniversary of bloody June 16, when a car bomb exploded on a Durban beachfront. This was a new phenomenon, with the liberation movement, the African National Congress, previously careful to strike at military targets.

Ahead of June 16, Botha placed two laws before his parliament – one to indemnify the security forces against any action taken 'in good faith' to quell unrest – the other giving wide powers to the police to detain anyone indefinitely without recourse to the courts.

The laws were to have been passed in good time to allow security measures against threatened demonstrations and a general strike to mark the day. For the first time, however, the tame 'coloured' and Indian parliaments refused to rubberstamp the laws. They will be passed in due course, there are constitutional provisions for that, the whites being in overall control. But Botha had to pass a state of emergency at midnight of June 11.

At dawn, 1,000 people had been detained and a further 2,000 are rumoured to have been detained since then. As for June 16, the day the European foreign ministers agonised over sanctions and referred the whole issue to a useful committee to mull over, millions of Africans went on strike and fear gripped South African whites.

Under the state of emergency the media is muzzled. It is an offence to report on anything, from 'subversive' statements to security forces' actions. South Africa has always believed in killing the messenger. Now they also want to kill the message.

The reason is simple. Odd though it may sound, Pretoria believes that the 'riots' in the labour reservoirs they call 'homelands', in the urban slums, are caused by 'communist agitators'. Once these have been removed, peace will return. The 'rioters' it is believed were incited by the media who gave them overseas coverage.

This seeming logic was not defeated by the fact that during the 1985/6 state of emergency when the media was also kept out of riot-torn areas the death toll continued to rise.

The problem with faith – and belief in racial supremacy is faith – is that it defies logic or reason. Pretoria and its frightened

4½ million white citizens are now contemplating 'going it alone', in the face of whatever 'measures' the outside world may try or the desperate 24 million 'non-whites', so-called, will do. For the 'bitter-enders' it could mean the last trek.

Bloodshed is nothing new in South Africa. Bloodshed on the scale to come may be.

Ruth Weiss