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South Africa: The Truth Commission: Unto the third or fourth generation
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Cape Town - The commissioner spreads the photos on the table. A slope of
tamboekie grass, a wind- blue sky, some fresh soil.

"He shows us the place ... we dig ... we find red topsoil mixed with black subsoil
... we know ... and then the spade hits something ..."

"She was brave this one, hell she was brave," says the grave indicator, the
perpetrator, and whistles softly through his teeth "She simply would not talk."

The skull has a bullet hole right on the top. "She must have been kneeling ..."
says the commissioner.

Ribs. Breastbone that once held heart. Around the pelvis is a blue plastic bag.
"Oh yes," remembers the grave indicator. "We kept her naked, and after 10 days
she had made herself this panty." He sniggers: "God ... she was brave."

The commissioner's eyes are burnished in the brilliant yellow of anger. It is he
who said: "Sometimes at night I wake up with a rage pounding in my breast ...
as if to wipe me out like a veld fire."

It was he who tried during the last half-hour of FW de Klerk's political
submission to pin down a connection between National Party policy and the
deaths in KwaZulu- Natal. But like the commission's lawyer, like the other
commissioners, he failed.

De Klerk and his hostile delegation leaves. The room and passages are filled
with rage. People swamped with fury and desperation. Desmond Tutu's skin
hangs dull and loose from his face, his shoulders covered in defeat. I want to go
to him in one or other infantile gesture. To kiss his ring, to touch his dress. When
De Klerk walked out, it was as if something forever slipped through my fingers.

Speechless, I stand before Tutu. From whence will words now come? For us. Us
hanging, quivering, ill, from this soundless space of the Afrikaner past? What
does one say? What the hell does one do with this load of skeletons, shame
and ash?

That was the day - the day the "Big Dip" began. The Day of the Undeniable

Divide. One moment the people of this country were the closest they have ever been, the next they were further apart than they have ever been.

The NP started mobilising on anti-truth commission sentiments. Those in and around the commission began to feel the futility of the dream of reconciliation. What we have hoped for will never be.

"One cannot leave now," says a colleague. "One must see the process through, otherwise one will be dangling in the air forever."

We ask the commission about plans for the end of the year. Any ceremony to conclude its workings and set people free of the past? The commission is vague. It is obviously more concerned with the final report and two vaults of amnesty applications.

Why do people hang in there? Has the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) become the last empire of naïve righteousness and impossible dreams?

But those in and around the commission have been singed into their own versions of Vlakplaas units. We from the press can only talk to each other. We buy food for each other, we live each other's stories - we experience the process through a thousand eyes. Every second person in the street looks like a commissioner, every group looks like the investigative unit on its way to a breakthrough. We and the guards are on first-name terms. We all want to resign. We all yearn for another beat.

At Tzaneen, a young Tswana interpreter is interviewed. The man holds on to the table-top, his other hand moves restlessly in his lap. "It is difficult to interpret victim hearings," he says, "because you use the first person all the time. 'I sit in front of the mortuary ... on a low wall ... I have to identify my child ... while I wait I see liquid ... slowly coming from under the door down to a drain at the corner of the building ... I see it is red ... I see it is also green ... I just walk ... I think they didn't find me for a long time ... I have no distance when I say I it runs through me with I.' ... After the first three months of hearings, my wife and our baby left me because of my violent outbursts. The truth commission provided counselling and I was advised to stop. But I don't want to. This is my history, and I want to be part of it - until the end."

The end. We all wait for the end. And we assume the truth commission will provide this end.

"That is a disastrous attitude," says Valkenberg psychiatrist Dr Sean Kaliski. "People thought that the truth commission would be this quick fix, this rugby World Cup scenario and that we would go through the process and fling our arms around each other, and we'll be blood brothers for ever more. And that is absolute nonsense.

"The TRC is where the reality of this country is hitting home and hitting home very hard. And that is good. But there will be no grand release - every individual will have to devise his or her own personal method of coming to terms with what has happened."

Anti-truth commission attitudes blast into the open. The commission is bombarded with demands and legal threats, Parliament besieged with truth commission debates, TRC reporters targeted with hate mail.

A column-writer in the Free State writes: "Reject the truth commission with the disgust it deserves - on untested evidence it tries to portray the Afrikaner as the icon of all evil. Untested evidence has become the truth of the 'boerehaters'."

Kaliski says it is a positive development if people feel compelled to deny these things. It is the first step in a process akin to the stages terminally ill patients experience: denial, rage, bargaining, depression - out of which acceptance will eventually surface.

"I think people are too impatient," says Kaliski. "I personally would be very concerned if whites could overnight integrate information that overturns their whole world view. It will take decades, generations, and people will assimilate the truths of this country piece by piece."

Kaliski says that white Afrikaners in particular are feeling terribly exposed. "If you personalise it: a very proud person who is publicly exposed for being a scoundrel will almost never respond with humility and contrition; they will almost always respond with anger and outrage. The community feels exposed because they have been caught out, shown up as evil, and this is very hard to deal with."

The vocabulary around the truth commission changes from phase to phase, but the word that pitched most constantly was: underestimate. Everything of, in and around the dynamics of the truth commission has been underestimated.

The only nightmare is the possibility that the commission missteps so wrongly that it wipes out all its successes. Of late, overestimate has become a much-used word. And this shortly before the commission has to pass its last two milestones. Two impossible ones: reconciliation and reparation.

And the two go hand in hand. The one cannot be without the other. If people don't get reparation, they won't forgive. If people are not forgiven, they won't offer reparation. Or rather, this was my thinking.

De Klerk was nothing more or less than a politician looking for a forum to sort out tensions in his own ranks. "Don't worry," says someone, "the commission

has enough evidence on De Klerk. He will eat his words."

And if he eats them, and has his nose rubbed in it, what will happen then? I wonder. Will he then be forgiven? Will people assist with reparation because they feel deeply humiliated? Will white and black in small rural towns now work jointly for the benefit of those who suffered the most?

I ask a Jewish colleague: "What kind of reparation was made by the Germans?" He spells out an impressive scenario, ranging from free transport and pensions, to leaders kneeling at Jewish memorials. And money - money from the Federal Republic of Germany was the largest contributing factor to the full industrialisation of Israel ...

I think about the unimaginative reparation document workshopped some months ago. I also know better than to ask him whether anyone was forgiven on the basis of reparation. Is contrition in the form of reparation then just as futile as denial?

And suddenly it is as if an undertow is taking me out ... out and out. And behind me sinks the country of my skull like a sheet in the dark - and I hear a thin song, hoofs, hedges of venom, fever and destruction fermenting and hissing underwater. I shrink and prickle. Against. Against my blood and the heritage thereof. Will I forever be them - recognising them as I do daily in my nostrils? Yes. And what we have done will never be undone. It doesn't matter what we do. What De Klerk does. Unto the third and the fourth generation.

Famished. Parched, one waits on Constand Viljoen. A modest group.

Viljoen speaks as if he wants to capture something, bring back something, confirm some essence of Afrikanerskap that is wholesome. One wants it. But at the same time knows it not to be.

While Viljoen talks about how the British have taken away the land of the Boers, an English journalist mutters: "Ah shame!" Before I realise, I spit like a flame: "Shut up, you - Viljoen is at least trying."

Viljoen was the only political leader who requested that a special reconciliation commission be set up next year: "The hardening of attitudes I experience daily."

After the first political submissions last year I interviewed Tutu. "Weren't you irritated that you had to listen to four versions of South Africa's past?" He spreads his four skinny fingers under my nose. "Four versions ... four ... exist of the life of Christ. Which one would you have liked to chuck out?"

I try another question. "Why did the last part of the ANC submission sound so paranoid? As if the whole world is in a conspiracy against Thabo Mbeki." Tutu

replies that many people are the second or third generation to be persecuted. "And if you don't know the past, you will never understand today's politics."

A friend who has emigrated is visiting me in the office. She answers a call. "It's your child. He says he's writing a song on Joe Mamasela and he needs a buzzword to rhyme with Vlakplaas." She lowers the phone. "Who is Joe Mamasela?"

A massive sigh breaks through my chest. For the first time in months - I breathe.

The absolution one has given up on, the hope for a catharsis, the ideal of reconciliation, the dream of a powerful reparation policy ... Maybe this is all that is important - that I and my child know Vlakplaas and Mamasela. That we know what happened there.

When the truth commission process started last year, one instinctively realised: if you cut yourself off from the process, you will wake up in a foreign country - a country that you don't know and that you will never understand.