

Tribal war in S. Africa

While eyes have been riveted on the Gulf, South Africa has edged to the brink of civil war. It's too bad that what's happening there has not received more media attention.

All those naive liberals and leftists who saw South Africa as a simple conflict between good and evil should have a hard look at South Africa's bloody events. All those naive people who went to rock concerts for Saint Nelson Mandela should be forced to listen to the screams of blacks being speared, stabbed or burned alive by their fellow blacks. Or ponder impending criminal charges against Winnie Mandela for alleged involvement in the murder of a 14-year-old boy.

Tribal war has erupted. Just, in fact, what this column has long been predicting would happen when apartheid's restraints were eased.

Apartheid means "apartness" as well as racial segregation. Critics say apartheid fostered or perpetuated tribal animosities that should long ago have disappeared. Apartheid supporters claim the system was the only way antagonistic black tribes could co-exist: White power was all that kept blacks from one another's throats.

In this month alone, more than 800 blacks have been killed in communal fighting between the nation's two largest tribes, the Zulu and Xhosa (pronounced Koosa). The African National Congress, so revered in the West, is primarily a Xhosa organization with a veneer of other tribes, non-blacks and communists. Its political rival, Inkatha, is largely Zulu. They are now at war.

Readers may recall a letter I cited last year, sent to me by Inkatha leader Chief Mangosuthu Buthelezi, in which he described his fear that civil war between blacks was a greater threat than apartheid. In recent months, Buthelezi has been trying repeatedly to meet with Nelson Mandela to stop the fighting. But Mandela's fellow ANC leaders — particularly the communists — have refused to allow a meeting of South Africa's two most

Punch



"When somebody invents fire, I'll be ready."

ERIC MARGOLIS



important black leaders.

The ANC, which has successfully portrayed itself in the West as the sole legitimate voice of non-white South Africans, does not want to give any credibility to its rival, Inkatha. Buthelezi, says the ANC, is merely the head of a black tribal homeland and a collaborator with the whites.

This, of course, is nonsense. Buthelezi speaks for the nation's largest ethnic group. Equally noteworthy, he is a democratically elected leader and a voice of moderation compared to the ANC's totalitarian organizational system and its continued dedication to state socialism.

While the ANC refuses to talk, it has been encouraging its armed gangs in the townships to drive out or slaughter Zulu migrant workers, so depriving Inkatha of power bases outside of its home province, Natal. In many cases political rivalry has given way to simple tribal hatred, mindless violence or battles for turf between local mafias. White extremists, who seem to hate the reformist government of Prime Minister F.W. de Klerk even more than the ANC, are watching all this with glee, chorusing, "We told you so."

The ANC has tried to blame fighting on white provocateurs or the police. In a few cases, such claims may be correct. But overall the ANC has itself mainly to blame for the surging wave of violence. By refusing to accept Inkatha as a political equal and by trying to impose its will on all blacks, the ANC is acting like the typical dictatorships found across black Africa. The kind that have wrecked their economies, abused their peoples and often ended up mired in tribal wars.

Meanwhile, Prime Minister de Klerk is soldiering onward with his long march away from apartheid to a racially open, democratic system. But as fighting spreads in the townships, de Klerk is coming under increasing pressure from white "securocrats" — the military, police and intelligence officials in Pretoria whose power, though greatly reduced by de Klerk, still remains formidable. Crack down, they urge, while the security forces can yet contain the township violence. Otherwise, they warn, South Africa could dissolve into a score of bloody regional wars that might run on for years.

A political solution to the growing black civil war is obviously urgent. But it's also becoming alarmingly apparent that Mandela, a decent and moderate man who is also a royal prince of the Xhosas, may not have enough authority to restrain the extremists in ANC. Power is slipping away from the ANC politburo of elderly men and into the hands of young militants at a time when 50% of the nation's population is under 16.

The West, by failing to give Buthelezi sufficient political support that would force the ANC to negotiate with him, is playing directly into the hands of the extremists.