

# Torture in

An interview with

**"All the major networks are there, they haven't done the story. I think... they're afraid of losing their visas"**

By Jennifer Gould, The Varsity

A child runs into the tall grass nearby. Frantically trying to escape, he seems more like a frightened rabbit than a young boy in shirtsleeves on a hot day. A large adult male catches the boy and begins to beat him. Soon, another large man runs into the scene and joins the first. He adds a couple of well-placed kicks to the boy's frail body, now limp on the ground.

The scene cuts while the beating continues. You wonder how such a small boy could survive a beating like that. It's a vision that grabs you. The memory will linger on; it will haunt you. Yet, this is only one of the many images in Sharon Sopher's internationally highly acclaimed and illegally filmed documentary 'Witness to Apartheid.'

Thousands more of these horrific images remain unfiled. "What you see in the film is everywhere," says Sopher, an independent American producer who visited Toronto last month to promote the first showing of her film in Canada by the CBC.

Filmed secretly during the 1985 state of emergency in South Africa, the documentary presents moving accounts by victims and witnesses of police violence against children in black South African townships. Participants in Sopher's vivid film include young black student activists from the banned Congress of South African Students (COSAS), the friends and family members of apartheid's many victims, along with the black and white doctors who treat them, and Archbishop Desmond Tutu.

While Sopher's film is a startling portrayal of South African police brutality against children, hers is not the only documentation. Last April, the New York-based Lawyers Committee for Human Rights issues a 184-page report on the subject. According to the Committee, "more than 200 children have been killed in the past year and and hundreds more have been injured in police operations in the townships in which tear gas, bird-shot, rubber bullets, sjamboks (metal tipped whips) and even live ammunition are used indiscriminately and excessively."

Over the last two years of growing unrest, more than 1,400 blacks have been killed — over two-thirds by security forces. And, a large part of the violence was directed at children under 18 years of age.

"At times," the report said, "violence against children has been the result of a deliberate strategy of the security forces to suppress student organizations and protests. In their frequent sweeps and patrols through the townships, security forces have singled out young people of school age for arrest, pursuing them with sjamboks... and shooting at random any child who runs away."

Sopher cites international reports stating that 25,000 people have been arrested since June — 11,000 of which were children. Allegedly, 83 per cent of these people have been tortured. Although the South African police formally denied the Committee's and other allegations, Sopher believes otherwise.

"It (violence and brutality) was so easy to find that you really have to ask why, when all the major networks have bureaus there, they haven't done the story. I think it has to do with the fact that they're afraid of losing their visas," says Sopher.

No stranger to network television, Sopher worked at NBC news for 12 years. "Domestically, before I started covering international news, much of what I tried to do at NBC is what we would call disenfranchised reporting; I report on different issues having to do with minorities. When I started in this business (1969) in New York, women and minorities were not allowed into the unions," she said.

Sopher is also no stranger to controversy. In 1973, despite internal opposition, Sopher hired NBC's first all-female crew. She also produced the first series on the black Muslims in the United States. At one point, due to her award-winning coverage of a Muslim hostage crisis in Washington D.C., Sopher received such serious death threats that NBC hired bodyguards to protect her. An attempt was made on her life.

While Sopher is proud of her achievements at NBC, she eventually became so frustrated with the limitations implicit in working for a network that she felt compelled to leave. "Networks are very restricted," said Sopher. "If you're writing a wire copy story in a newsroom, you know, for instance, that you do not refer to the 'contras' as anything but 'freedom fighters.' There are very definite restrictions, and that's why I left."

Sopher describes her decision to leave NBC as a type of evolutionary process. "We live in a society where 'me' comes first. We get an education for 'me' and very few of us are really trained to think to use our education for other people. And essentially that's the decision I made. I have all these skills as a communicator, but what am I using them for? I'm using them for a network that makes \$300 million profit a year, and that's their objective — to make money. Essentially, what I gave up in order to do what I'm doing is a lot of money."

**"...nobody is telling the story about the torture and death of our children"**

Sopher left NBC in May, 1985 in order to concentrate on her own independent productions, like 'Witness to Apartheid, that NBC wouldn't have risked making.

Yet Sopher did not go to South Africa to make a documentary. Originally, Sopher was to write an article on human rights activist Desmond Tutu. But Tutu inspired Sopher to break both convention and the law to produce the film.

When Sopher met Tutu in South Africa, he told her: "In a matter of a

few weeks, journalists won't be able to move, to do any significant reporting here at all and, even though there are 200 journalists based here permanently, nobody is telling the story about the torture and the death of our children."

Sopher said she still wasn't too receptive to do the film because she knew how difficult it is to raise

money to produce an independent film.

The more research Sopher did for her South African article, the more she felt compelled to produce the film. "I went out and started doing research for the article and began to see just so much evidence about the torture of children and such horrendous things. One of the first days I was there a four year old child playing in a front yard in one of the townships was shot and killed by a soldier's rubber bullet," she says.

"Even though I've covered Africa (the revolutionary movements in Rhodesia, now Zimbabwe, and Mozambique in 1976)," says Sopher, "I went there thinking I knew the story, and I didn't." It was then that she decided to go ahead with the film, despite the many risks and obvious difficulties involved in such a project.

Sopher says it was important to her to "do something worthwhile (with the film) that's not being done."

Sopher figured out what was missing from the commercial media's coverage of apartheid while working for NBC. The network gave Sopher insight into the way the Western media, consciously or unconsciously, mani-



**"Apartheid does not**

plurates domestic and international news.

"One of the jobs I had at NBC was to take in the network library. When I started thinking about was that footage was I had seen over the years, I realized I had really never actually seen South Africans speak. So I decided I really wanted to collect as many interviews with the people and not the usual media celebrities, but with the people who are really the underbelly of apartheid — the ones who get kicked in the gut."

What Sopher discovered shocked and astonished her previous conventional Western assumptions. "The debates we get into