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Struggle goes on for S. Africa's blacks

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IT wasn't difficult to feel an affinity with the black population of South Africa. A lifetime of domination by others had them reeling under relentless suppression and oppression. Apartheid had them grossly marginalised in their own home.

Theirs had been a life of forced and brutal submission. It was only recently that the shackles of apartheid were removed and an increasing level of self-esteem emerged. And even then, the remnants of white supremacy over blacks were still apparent and widespread.

One manifestation of this was Lebo, a black driver from the transport company engaged to ferry members of the Press from one place of assignment to another. I am in the Press party which is accompanying Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad on his visit to this country.

It's quite normal for the Press party to engage the services of a driver and a van on such trips. The charges would be shared equally. On most occasions, one van would be taken by RTM, one by TV3 and one by the print media.

This time the print media had the services of Lebo, a reluctant black driver who had taken on the job less than six months ago. Lebo, 32, is a thin, quiet person with a bland expression.

Almost everyone in the van took him as he was, until we got talking during one of the long trips outside Johannesburg. We learnt that Lebo was far different from other drivers.

Lebo was a public relations officer with the South African Ministry of Foreign Affairs. He was one of several hundred employees who were retrenched more than a year ago when the ministry began a downsizing exercise. Lebo went in search of jobs that fitted his qualification, but none was available.

Lebo had 12 years of formal education and speaks English very well. His job in the ministry had exposed him to current world issues and he could articulate them quite clearly. If not for the fact that the retrenchment was conducted on the "last in, first out" principle, Lebo would probably have retained his job.

He said: "I looked for a job everywhere. I tried to get a job that fitted my qualification, but it was in vain. I have a child to support. I also live with my extended family, and I'm expected to contribute to their upkeep. After a while, I decided to take whatever job there was.

"I took up this job because I needed one. I decided that I couldn't be choosy. If I was, my family would go hungry. I need the money, we all need the money. Of course, I had to take a big pay cut. But that's not the point. The point is I needed a job, and if that means I have to be a driver, I'd do it."

During the long trip to Pecanwood Estate, a 600ha "gold and country living" modelled after Country Heights in Kajang, Lebo answered a lot of questions about life in South Africa. He was hopeful the black people would get their rightful share of the country's wealth as economic reforms took place.

He showed us vast tracts of land, shops and buildings owned by whites, reflecting a country whose economy is run and managed by whites. It would be quite a while before the black population truly enjoyed the blood, sweat and tears of their freedom cry.

"Bear in mind that apartheid officially ended in 1994 with the election

of a new Government. My child may not fully enjoy the benefits of independence. His children may ... but our first battle is to restore our self-esteem, have jobs and housing for everyone, bring down the crime rate, improve educational facilities and live decently," he said.

"Has apartheid really ended?" I asked. Lebo explained that apartheid still existed in people-to-people interactions. He speaks of subtle oppression. For instance, white bosses discriminate against black workers, the use of the Afrikaans language is much preferred over others including English, and economic might still rules.

The blacks' rise to independence will take a lot of time to be fully realised. It would not be possible to see blacks in effective control of the economy in a short time as this would require training, opportunities, exposure and help.

Individuals like Lebo need to persevere. He said that for survival's sake, he would swallow his pride to feed his family. Much more needed to be done politically, he said. Otherwise, martyrs like Steve Biko would have died in vain. "Can we visit Biko's grave," we asked?

"You'd need armed escorts for that. It's located in a black township where crime is notorious. If we go unescorted in a van like this, there'll be a lot of youths who'll rip it apart.

"Biko contributed to bring an end to apartheid. But the damage of apartheid - high crime rate, low educational level among blacks, a built-in perception that they are surrounded by enemies - will take a long, long time to disappear," he added.

On one short trip, we saw a big school and children playing in its field. Some kind of football competition was going on. When I asked Lebo if this was a whites-only school, he said: "It was, but now there are a few black students there. But the fees are so high that very, very few blacks can afford it."

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