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# **Nonviolent Peaceforce Feasibility Study**

**(first edition)**

## **2.7 Facing down the guns: When has nonviolence failed?**

***by Carl Stieren***

## **Facing down the guns: When has nonviolence failed?**

**Carl Stieren**

In Sharpeville, South Africa, police opened fire on 5,000 unarmed Africans at a peaceful rally, killing 67 demonstrators in 1960. In Mississippi, three nonviolent civil rights workers were killed by a white Ku Klux Klan members and a local policeman in 1964. In Tiananmen Square, the Chinese People's Army opened fire on nonviolent protesters, killing between 300 and 1,700 people in 1989. At the Santa Cruz Cemetery in Dili, East Timor, the Indonesian Army opened fire on a peaceful procession, killing 270 peaceful demonstrators in 1991.

But did these acts of violence mean the failure of nonviolence? The Sharpeville massacre was broadcast around the world, and isolated South Africa, encouraged economic sanctions, though freedom was not to come for 33 years. The murders in Mississippi may well have been the spur to the U.S. Congress passing the Voting Rights Act of 1965, which placed federal observers at polls in Mississippi and elsewhere in the U.S. South to ensure equal voting rights. In China, however, twelve years after the Tiananmen Massacre, none of the democratic reforms sought by the student demonstrators have been achieved. The Santa Cruz cemetery massacre in Dili also made news around the world, and was part of the pressure that led to the independence of East Timor, although at the high price of a large number of civilian deaths from the pro-Indonesia militias.

### **How does one define the failure of nonviolence?**

A definition of failure might include

- a) deaths of nonviolent protesters
- b) deaths of Third Party Nonviolent companions of the protesters
- c) abandonment of nonviolence by movements that had previously embraced nonviolence
- d) failure by those engaged in nonviolence to achieve any stated goals
- e) "fading away" of nonviolent movements

No one of the above definitions is likely to be satisfactory, although the author suggests that the first three, avoiding deaths of nonviolent protesters and those accompanying them, and helping a nonviolent movement stay nonviolent, should be taken as our minimum definition of success for the Global Nonviolent Peace Force.

Each case study I have suggested for failure of nonviolence falls into one of two categories of nonviolent action, either nonviolent movements of third party nonviolent intervention. First we will consider the failure of nonviolent movements.

### **Failure of nonviolent movements**

There are a number of prominent failures of nonviolent movements, each of which involves the deaths of more than one participant in those movements:

1. The White Rose - the Nazi government's killing of six German opponents to Hitler in 1943

2. Sharpeville Massacre - South African police killing 67 nonviolent protesters in 1960
3. Tiananmen Square - killing of between 300 and 1,700 protesters by the Chinese People's Army in Beijing in 1989
4. Timosoara Massacre - killing of 97, and 160 one week later in Romania in 1989
5. Santa Cruz Massacre - killing of 270 peaceful demonstrators in Dili, East Timor, by the occupying Indonesian Army, 1991
6. Ibrahim Rugova vs. the KLA - nonviolence loses to the Kosovo Liberation Army, 1999.

### **The White Rose**

Between June, 1942 and February, 1943, a small resistance group of students, soldiers and a professor, based in Munich, operated an underground resistance cell with the name "The White Rose. They succeeded in distributing six mimeographed leaflets in cities all across Germany in quantities of between 1,000 and 10,000. The leaflets called for Germans to abandon Hitler and his war. Their fifth leaflet contained the words: "A new war of liberation has begun! The better part of the people already fights on our side ... No pack of criminals can possibly achieve a German victory. Break with National Socialism while there's still time."<sup>1</sup>

Their sixth leaflet, which was to be their last, echoed the news of the defeat of the Wehrmacht at the Battle of Stalingrad, a fact that had just been reported on the radio in February, 1943. On February 18, 1943, Hans and Sophie Scholl were discovered throwing leaflets down a staircase at the University of Munich by a porter at the university who was an off-hour Storm Trooper. They and their friend Christoph Probst were tried by the People's Court and condemned to death. The plans of the local Gauleiter to stage a public hanging of the three were cut short by Heinrich Himmler, who, according to Hanser, wanted no martyrs and feared that public opinion would turn against them for such an act. Instead of facing a public hanging, they were guillotined behind prison walls. Alex Schmorell and Kurt Huber, the philosophy professor, were condemned and executed on July 13, 1943. The sentence pronounced by the judge, Roland Freisler, showed what the National Socialists were afraid of: "Alexander Schmorell, Kurt Huber, and Wilhelm Graf, have, in time of war, produced leaflets urging sabotage of the armaments industry and the overthrow of the National Socialist way of life; they have also spread defeatist ideas and vilified the Fuhrer in the grossest manner; all of which aided and abetted the enemies of the Reich and undermined the fighting capacity of our nation. They are therefore condemned to death."<sup>2</sup> The last of the six to die was Willi Graf, who was killed on October 12, 1943.

### **Sharpeville Massacre**

In South Africa, while the famous Treason Trial was taking place, the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC), a rival of the African National Congress, had urged

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<sup>1</sup> Hanser 1979:225

<sup>2</sup> Hanser, 1979:295

people to stay away from work on March 21, 1960. The PAC urged Africans to present themselves at police stations and to say “We do not have passes. We will not carry passes again. You had better arrest us all.” According to Meredith “At 1:15 p.m., by which time nearly 300 police were facing a crowd of some 5,000 Africans, a scuffle broke out near one of the gates to the police compound. A police officer was pushed over. The crowd surged forward to see what was happening. According to police witnesses, stones were thrown at them. No order was given to shoot. No warning shots were fired. In a moment of panic, the police opened fire indiscriminately into the crowd. The crowd turned and fled, but still the firing continued. Sixty-seven Africans were killed and 1286 wounded. Most were shot in the back.”<sup>3</sup>

### **Tiananmen Square**

The student demonstrations for democracy began in Tiananmen Square on April 17, 1989, when students from Beijing’s universities came to the square to lay wreaths in memory of Hu Yaobang, a previous general secretary of the Communist Party who had tolerated student dissent, and who had just died. By April 27, more than 100,000 students, joined by 400,000 other Chinese citizens, marched on the square to protest the charge in the April 26 issue of *The People’s Daily* that the students had “a planned conspiracy”.<sup>4</sup>

On June 3, 1989, between 300 and 1,700 protesters were killed by the Chinese People’s Army when the Army cleared Tiananmen Square. Ironically, many of the Beijing student groups had left before June 3 because of indications that the government would use force to clear the square. But student groups from elsewhere in China, who had come to Beijing to take part in hunger strikes and demonstrations, had not heard the news. These out-of-town students made up most of the groups in Tiananmen Square on June 3 when the army attacked.<sup>5</sup>

### **Timosoara Massacre**

On December 17, 1989, Romanian security forces killed 97 peaceful demonstrators in the town of Timosoara, people who were protesting the exile of a Protestant minister by the Communist government of Nicolae Ceausescu. Nine days later, the security forces and the army opened fire on a crowd of 100,000 in Timosoara, killing 160.

Romania had the only major violent conflicts in the Eastern European revolutions of 1989. Initial reports said that thousand were killed. Later estimates by Bernard Kouchner, France’s Minister of State for Humanitarian Action, were that 700 were killed, half of them in Bucharest, as of December 26, 1989.<sup>6</sup>

The killings happened largely because while the Army had defected to the side of the protesters, the *Securitate* troops were loyal to Ceausescu, who used them against the demonstrators. The *Securitate* shot to kill. Most of the violence ended after the Ceausescus were executed, on Christmas day, 1989.

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<sup>3</sup> Meredith 1997:173

<sup>4</sup> Ackerman and Duvall 2000:423

<sup>5</sup> Thomas 1994:158

<sup>6</sup> Blétry 1990:39

“The problem being faced—murderous sharp-shooting by desperate individuals—was one with which civil resistance was ill-equipped to cope”.<sup>7</sup>

### **Santa Cruz Massacre**

On November 12, 1991, the Indonesian Army opened fire on a peaceful demonstration in the Santa Cruz Cemetery in Dili, East Timor, killing 270. Images of the Santa Cruz Cemetery Massacre were flashed across the world because a British photographer, Max Stahl, was there with his video camera. Two American reporters there were beaten by the Indonesian military - Amy Goodman, a reporter from Pacifica Radio, and Allan Nairn, a writer for *The New Yorker*. In testimony before the U.S. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations on February 27, 1992, Nairn told what happened that day in Dili.<sup>8</sup>

“People were chanting and giving the 'V' sign and talking among themselves. By the time it reached the cemetery the crowd had grown quite large. There were perhaps three thousand to five thousand people. Some filed in toward Sebastiao's grave, and many others remained outside, hemmed in on the street by cemetery walls. People were, at that point, standing around, talking excitedly among themselves, when, suddenly, someone noticed that one of the exit routes had been sealed off by an Indonesian troop truck.

“Then, looking to our right we saw, coming down the road, a long, slowly marching column of uniformed troops. They were dressed in dark brown, moving in disciplined formation, and they held M-16s before them as they marched. As the column kept advancing, seemingly without end, people gasped and began to shuffle back. I went with Amy Goodman of WBAI / Pacifica radio and stood on the corner between the soldiers and the Timorese. We thought that if the Indonesian force saw that foreigners were there, they would hold back and not attack the crowd.

“But as we stood there watching as the soldiers marched into our face, the inconceivable thing began to happen. The soldiers rounded the corner, never breaking stride, raised their rifles and fired in unison into the crowd. Timorese were backpedaling, gasping, trying to flee, but in seconds they were cut down by the hail of fire. People fell, stunned and shivering, bleeding in the road, and the Indonesian soldiers kept on shooting. I saw the soldiers aiming and shooting people in the back, leaping bodies to hunt down those who were still standing. They executed schoolgirls, young men, old Timorese, the street was wet with blood and the bodies were everywhere.

Nairn said that Indonesia later claimed that during the course of the march, a soldier was stabbed by a Timorese in front of the military district command base. Nairn said he saw a scuffle that lasted 45 seconds but could not see anyone stabbed. None of the Western reporters present reported seeing a soldier stabbed that day.

### **Ibrahim Rugova vs. the KLA**

A powerful nonviolent movement among ethnic Albanians in the Yugoslav province of Kosovo, led by Ibrahim Rugova, lost out to the Kosovar Liberation Army (KLA), ending in the Kosovo War of 1999. In that war, Kosovars of Al-

<sup>7</sup> Roberts 1991:6

<sup>8</sup> East Timor Action Network website, <http://www.etan.org/timor/nairndili.htm>

banian nationality were expelled by Yugoslav leader Slobodan Milosovic, and NATO planes from the USA, Canada, Holland and Spain bombed cities in Kosovo and elsewhere in Yugoslavia.

David Hartsough of Peaceworkers, returning from a visit to Kosovo during which he was arrested and spent four days in a Yugoslav jail, warned of the danger of violence in Kosovo in an article in the *Sonoma County Peace Press* in July, 1998:

“Why has the international community so far refused to heed the Albanian people's urgent plea for an end to the repression in Kosovo? The people of Kosovo are increasingly considering taking up arms. At the same time, many of the people we talked with hoped that the international community will force an internationally mediated solution to the conflict as finally happened in Dayton, but before a war, rather than afterwards. President Clinton stated on his recent trip to Africa that it was a tragedy that the international community had not acted quickly enough to stop the genocide in Rwanda. Isn't the time to act now in Kosovo?”<sup>9</sup>

At a forum at Brandeis University in December, 2000, Justice Richard Goldstone of the Constitutional Court of South Africa, and Chair of the Independent International Commission on Kosovo, said that NATO's intervention did constitute a war. The situation escalated in Kosovo because the international community did not take necessary steps towards early prevention. A lack of international support led to the failure of nonviolence movements in Kosovo and the consequent rise in violence on part of the KLA.<sup>10</sup>

### **Failure of third party nonviolent intervention**

There are a few cases of prominent failures of third party nonviolent intervention involving the deaths of more than one participant in those movements:

1. World Peace Brigade - its fading away after the threatened march on Northern Rhodesia, 1960
2. Mississippi Freedom Summer - killing of three civil rights workers, 1960
3. Killing of U.S. nuns in El Salvador - 1986
4. Mir Sada - the break-up a large-scale nonviolent intervention to Bosnia, 1993

### **World Peace Brigade**

The fading away of the World Peace Brigade after the early 1960s was the reason that Peace Brigades International was organized in 1981. There were two failed or mixed-results campaigns before the WPB faded into inaction. The first was a planned march from the Tanzanian border into Northern Rhodesia in 1962 to protest the denial of rights to Africans by the settler regime. This march never took place because of changed political events. The second project was begun in 1963 by the Indian section to calm the conflict on the Indo-Chinese border. The march they organized from Delhi to Peking never

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<sup>9</sup> Hartsough, David. “Report From the Front Lines in Kosovo”, *Sonoma County Peace Press*, June/July, 1998. <http://www.sonic.net/~peacentr/pres0698.shtml>

<sup>10</sup> Goldstone, Richard, Brandeis University website on the forum, “Intervention and Prevention: the Lessons of Kosovo”: <http://www.brandeis.edu/ethics/events/kosovosummary.html>

got to the Chinese border, and was met with hostile reaction from both governments. The conclusions drawn by PBI founders were to begin small, encourage a lower, more sustainable level of activity, and not to risk everything at the beginning by organizing large-scale nonviolent intervention.

The fading out of the World Peace Brigade from Africa began after the international situation changed and the nonviolent march from Dar-es-Salaam to the Zambian border was cancelled due to Roy Welensky's failure to get more than 10 per cent of white settler support for his proposed unilateral declaration of independence. "Worst of all, it confirmed the African suspicion that non-violence was mainly talk and that in the hard realities of political action, non-violence was largely irrelevant."<sup>11</sup>

Their second project was the voyage of the ship *Everyman III* in October, 1962 from London to Leningrad, where they were refused to be let ashore because the Cuban Missile Crisis had broken out. This voyage was undertaken "before the Brigade had organized its leadership, an effective mailing list for people interested in becoming members, or even a proper office," according to Devi Prasad.<sup>12</sup>

Their third and last project was a Delhi to Peking peace march after the India-China border clash of October, 1962. It began on March 1, 1963 and fizzled out when the marchers were refused permission to enter China—after having been accused of being pro-Chinese in the Indian press.

### **Mississippi Freedom Summer**

In 1964, the Student Nonviolent Co-ordinating Committee organized Mississippi Freedom Summer, a project to bring hundreds of white northern youths to help Mississippi Blacks organize voter registration campaigns - an activity that could put a Mississippi Black in danger.

On June 21, 1964, the three civil rights workers, who had been arrested earlier that day, were let out of jail at night. They were chased and captured by a gang of members of the Ku Klux Klan and by Deputy Sheriff Cecil Price and shot dead, their bodies buried in a local dam on private property belonging to one of the conspirators.

The theory was that a large-scale voting rights registration campaign might succeed, and the presence of outsiders would deter violence that would otherwise be brought down on local Blacks. Their theory was wrong. White northerner "outside agitators" were detested by Southern whites. And if the white northerner was Jewish, he was doubly hated. So it was for Michael Schwerner, a Jewish New York social worker who had helped establish a community centre in Meridian, Mississippi as part of Mississippi Freedom Summer. To let Schwerner to continue working unhindered would have been an unimaginable surrender by local white racists.

There was evidence that the killings had been ordered by a leader of the Klan. "Sam Bowers, the imperial Wizard of the White Knights (of the Ku Klux Klan), had personally approved (Schwerner's) 'elimination' Schwerner's death would send a message to all the northern civil rights workers who had no business

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<sup>11</sup> Weber 1996: 18-20

<sup>12</sup> Weber 1996: 21

meddling in the South's affairs."<sup>13</sup> Bowers was never convicted in the case, but in 1998, he was given a life sentence for a bombing he planned in 1966 that killed one person.

### Killing of U.S. nuns in El Salvador

On December 2, 1980, two months after the assassination of Archbishop Romero, the nuns Ita Ford, Maura Clarke, and Dorothy Kazel and lay missionary Jean Donovan, were killed on the road from the international airport to San Salvador. Their bodies were found on December 3, 1980, in Santiago Nonualco, La Paz. Their killing followed the assassination of Archbishop Oscar Romero, who was shot in the back on March 24, 1980 while he was performing mass. For the murder of the nuns, five National Guardsmen were eventually convicted in the case, the first known convictions of Salvadoran armed forces personnel for human rights violations, but higher-up involvement was not investigated. In 1989, six Jesuit priests were murdered by soldiers of the Salvadoran Army at the Central American University in San Salvador.<sup>14</sup>

The American citizenship of the nuns was not enough to protect them. Americas Watch reported 23 priests, nuns and ministers murdered or disappeared in El Salvador from 1972 to 1991. The four U.S. citizens made up 18 per cent of the total killed. There was hatred fostered of ministers, especially Catholic priests, by death squads in Central America. In Guatemala, there were at one time slogans painted on walls "Renew the country - kill a priest."



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*In the Doonesbury comic strip above by Gary Trudeau,, June 26, 1986, U.S. Congresswoman Lacey Davenport confronts Contra Commander-Less-Than-Zero, who at first thinks Lacey is a nun-and therefore expendable. Members of the US Congress are not expendable, however!*

### Mir Sada

<sup>13</sup> Cagin and Dray 1988: 12

<sup>14</sup> Americas Watch 1991



What would have been the largest third party nonviolent intervention across borders took place in 1993. Between 2,000 and 3,000 people from Italy, France, USA, Japan, Germany, Britain, Belgium, the Netherlands, Poland, Greece, Sweden, Norway and the Czech Republic gathered in Split, Croatia, in December, 1992, for a caravan to Sarajevo. The action was called "Mir Sada", or "Peace Now".

Its appeal sounded majestic, but had no concrete explanation of how the group would achieve such goals as:

- To stop the war, string with a 'cease fire' during the Mir Sada period
- To be in solidarity with each person suffering from this war, regardless of his/her ideology, sex, religion or ethnic origin,
- To represent civilian interposition against violence,
- To support and encourage a multi-ethnic population to live together in Bosnia
- To implement negotiations that will go beyond armed conquest and will impose both respect for, and the safeguard of, human rights under international law

This project was carried out by two organizations: *Beati i costruttori di pace*, and a French humanitarian organization, *Equilibre*. The group got as far as Prozor, beyond which there was fighting going on between Croatian and Bosnian ("Muslim") troops. "From our camp, we could watch, at short distance, grenades being shot towards the Bosnian-held area of Gornji Vakauf," wrote Christine Schweitzer, "This fighting finally caused the organizers at first to doubt the advisability of, and then to cancel, travel to Sarajevo."<sup>15</sup>

In her analysis, Schweitzer lists the following as reasons for the failure of the project:

- imprecise goals
- uncertainty about political positions, such as whom to recognize and speak to
- uncertainty about whether to be neutral or in solidarity with a particular group
- insufficient preparation and training
- a flawed decision-making structure
- lack of equal relationships with peace groups on all sides of the conflict

## Conclusion

In the cases above, there was perhaps one instance where proper nonviolence training and a disciplined movement may have prevented violence. Before the Sharpeville Massacre, the police felt threatened, with 300 of them surrounded by 5,000 demonstrators. One scuffle, followed by the crowd surging forward, was enough to cause the police to begin shooting, though no order to do so was given.

In the cases of the White Rose, the killing of the US nuns, the Santa Cruz massacre, and the Timosoara massacre, training would not have helped.

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<sup>15</sup> Schweitzer 2000:270

Those intent on killing would not have been deterred even by 100 per cent nonviolent behaviour by the demonstrators or protesters. In the the Santa Cruz massacre, Allan Nairn's shouted "America, America" and Amy Goodman's showed of her U.S. passport. Those two acts may have saved the lives of the two journalists. But the presence of journalists from the West was not enough to deter the Indonesian troops from firing on the crowd.

For the third party nonviolent interventions, better training and organization would certainly have helped the World Peace Brigade, and possibly could have made Mir Sada a success. If the organizers had other witnesses - perhaps a convoy of large numbers of observers present - the killings of the US nuns and the three civil rights workers might have been prevented.

Such actions may well have helped. But in the end, there is no guarantee that saying the right words and taking just best action will always prevent violence.

What this means for the Nonviolent Peaceforce is that

1. Before any nonviolent intervention, there must be thorough evaluation of the likelihood of whether the rules of engagement of the armed parties requiring killings, even in the face of international opposition. If the rules approve killing in nonviolent situations, using nonviolent means to prevent killing will not work unless the intervenors - those in the crisis area and the group's leaders - are willing to take a high risk of being killed, or possibly even to take that risk of being killed and send in more intervenors after the first group was slaughtered.
2. For any Nonviolent Peaceforce intervention to work, there must be thorough training by the local group of its members in nonviolent behaviour. The wrong signals sent to the army, the police, or militias by a crowd could panic those with guns and cause them to fire.
3. Individual members of a Nonviolent Peaceforce team must be carefully selected for success in nonviolence, and must have training that goes far beyond merely being an unarmed bodyguard. Karen Ridd's experience in El Salvador, and that of the PBI team in Colombia, where armed police raided a human rights group and demanded passports and cell phones, are clear cases where skillful, persuasive, well-trained team members are required to prevent setbacks, and even to prevent killings.