

## Shapiro's statement

### A new openness

President Shapiro's detailed response to the nine demands presented at Wednesday's sit-in is a move in the right direction for a president who has often been perceived as unresponsive and abrasive.

Shapiro's three-page statement which appears today in The Daily Princetonian seems to represent an attempt to connect and communicate with a larger sector of the community before his meeting with protest leaders tomorrow.

But it is imperative that Shapiro's statement in no way usurp the function of tomorrow's meeting or substitute for much-needed dialogue between students and administrators. If his statement is to be more than a symbolic or cosmetic gesture, Shapiro must remain true to his words and approach discussions with an open mind. He must acknowledge and consider all student input, rather than dismissing views that differ from those he offered today.

To address a wider community, Shapiro necessarily had to employ an impersonal form and tone in his statement. Several straight answers are the result of such a formal manner: Shapiro concretely addresses such issues as the administration's responsibility for paying speaker security costs and the proposal to elect a student to the Board of Trustees.

But Shapiro's formal style also gives him room to beat around the bush. His roundabout response to a particularly important and symbolic issue — the demand that he hold weekly office hours — avoids offering a definitive solution to a pressing problem. This demand, which goes to the very heart of Shapiro's perceived inaccessibility, requires a more concrete response.

Although an impersonal manner is the only way to address the larger university population, it is this very tone that in part sparked the student protest. Tomorrow's meeting will be an opportunity for Shapiro to prove that the spirit of openness reflected by his statement can carry over into his association with a smaller group of students.

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Nightmare through the peephole:  
First look at Screw-your-Roommate date

## Reporting in South Africa: Writing with a sense of desperation and hope

By KANTHAN PILLAY '91

When South African Consul John Davies told a university audience recently that his government allowed a free press, citing the fact that nearly all newspapers are critical of the Botha regime, it was difficult for me to restrain myself. Many people associate freedom of the press with the ability to express an opinion, and Consul Davies — like his government — is quick to take advantage of this.

Journalists have a different picture. We know that any fool can have an opinion, but a wise person will substantiate her opinion with fact. And it is by denying us our right to substantiate our opinions with facts that the South African government has effectively reduced us to a group of rambling fools. Case in point: What conclusion would you draw from this bit of information?

"I hate the police," Mary Makhubane said as she cradled her son's head in her lap.

Not much. The sentence could merely be the ramblings of a disgruntled whore, but what if I were to add:

Twelve-year-old Sipho had been shot in the back by a police officer and died some ten minutes later.

Backed by this bit of knowledge, Mrs. Makhubane's "ramblings" suddenly take on substance.

When the government denies us the right to report the atrocities perpetrated by their security forces in our townships, our reports are denied any validity; our opinions become mere ramblings.

Yet we write: for many of us, writing is a catharsis, and we pour our hearts into our words, hoping someone will feel our anguish.

Dr. Abu Asvat died three weeks ago. I wrote out of a sense of desperation; the article, printed below, was aimed at no one in particular. Like most black journalists in my country, I simply hope someone stops and listens.

Living in South Africa has a numbing effect on a human being. One soon becomes almost unaware of the daily cycle of violence, destruction, and death. Reports of children being mowed down by gunfire wash away before one's eyes — they are numbers, statistics. Getting acclimated to trauma is a very human way of insuring that we do not go insane. Yet in spite of this numbness, some events are so startling in their sheer senselessness that they can awaken even the most hardened of hearts from that stupor.

The first time I saw Asvat was through a haze of red-and-purple fog as I struggled to retain consciousness while being wheeled through the casualty ward of Johannesburg's Coronation Hospital. White coats and anonymous voices whipped about me in dizzying slow motion. And then, through the haze, a face appeared, smiled. A hand appeared, and clasped mine.

"Hello Kanthan," the voice said. "I'm Abu Asvat."

I'd met him before, though never in person. As a black political journalist in South Africa, my beat — like that of many of my colleagues — was never as clearly defined as those of our more-famous international counterparts. And it had been while researching emergency medical facilities available to victims of police brutality in the township that I had come across the name of this strangely anonymous hero of Soweto.

Dr. Asvat was chairman of the Health Secretariat of the Azanian People's Organization, a body formed to carry on the ideas first proposed by Steve Biko who had been murdered in police custody in 1977. Living in the township of Lenasia near Johannesburg, he commuted daily to neighbouring Soweto where he ran his practice, dispensing free care frequently and providing comfort and cheer to victims of apartheid's brutality.

Coordinating teams of volunteers, Dr. Asvat frequently led mobile clinics into the more isolated sections of black South Africa providing medical facilities in areas where such treatment was otherwise unobtainable, and the nearest hospital inaccessible to those without private transportation.

Now, as his voice shook me out of my anes-

thetized stupor, I heard myself responding in a voice that sounded much too normal to be my own. "Hi Abu. I told you we'd be meeting sometime soon. You guys have to get me out of here. I'm supposed to be swimming this weekend..."

It was six weeks later that I saw him again. As I lay propped up in bed with traction pins and pulleys, he wandered over to my bedside, dressed in one of those badly-fitting hospital robes. "I didn't get to go swimming yet," I told him.

"Neither did I," he said. "I'm a patient here right now."

We spoke only briefly of the small kidney stone that was bothering him before launching into an animated discussion on the State of the Nation. Over a month in the crowded public ward of Coronation with a short-wave radio as my only real source of information had left me starving, and I greedily lapped up every scrap, every tidbit relating to the world of politics outside.

He smiled as the newsreader announced that Albertina Sisulu had been named as one of the organisation's three presidents. Mrs. Sisulu, as wife of the imprisoned secretary-general of the banned African National Congress, had been silenced for

many years by the state.

The law prohibiting her from appearing in public places had prevented her from working in any public

hospital as a nurse — her profession. Questions of political disagreement had not been on Dr. Asvat's mind when he employed Mrs. Sisulu in his Soweto practice.

He left the hospital soon after that August in 1983, fully recovered from the treatment for his kidney stone. I followed some weeks later with plaster-encased leg and bruised ego back into the newsroom.

In the years that followed up to the present, as the situation in the townships worsened, Dr. Asvat's role became even more important. The frequency of victims of tear-gas inhalation and gunshots increased. There were new forms of trauma — rubber bullets that killed, internal injuries from torture during incarceration, and more.

Dr. Abu-Baker Asvat died last week. On Friday, two men entered his surgery in Soweto asking for treatment. Mrs. Sisulu entered their names into the register, and one of the men signed his name, while the other affixed his thumbprint, saying he could not write. When they were admitted into the surgery, one of the men drew a firearm. Dr. Asvat was shot twice through the heart. The men fled.

Dr. Asvat's murder was clearly an assassination, yet it would be pointless to ask "why" or "who." The men who killed him were not professionals — practiced killers would never have signed their names and left their thumbprint, let alone kill in front of a witness and leave the witness unharmed.

The apartheid system's brutality twists and contorts the most innocent of human beings to the extent that many people would pick up a gun and fire it at an unknown person in exchange for a paltry sum that would ensure their existence for another week while the real killers will tuck away their wallets and go about their work with nothing present to ever link them to their crime.

There is no justice that we may call for. No trial, prison sentence, execution will ever make up for the sheer waste of human potential, for in killing Dr. Asvat, they have also murdered countless others who will no longer have him to depend on to save their lives. There is no immediate target upon which we can heap our anger, our frustration.

In the insanity that is today's world, there is not much that one can say in praise of people who every day through sheer necessity commit countless acts of heroism. In a country that does not permit its population to aspire to much, one can hope, at best, to become a truly exceptional human being.

Dr. Asvat was a truly exceptional human being. No finer tribute can be paid to him. He would not have asked for more.

Kanthan Pillay was born in South Africa and was a political reporter there for six years.