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The history of SANA - an attempt at an independent, African based news agency

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The Southern African News Agency (SANA) was launched in Cape Town (South Africa) in September 1975 as a loose association of freelance and full-time reporters and photographers in Southern Africa. It aimed at providing an in-depth information service for the international press and others concerned with the dissemination of information on Southern Africa.

It was felt that those foreign correspondents resident in South Africa, particularly, relied too heavily on South African government communiques and copy from the white owned South African Press Association (SAPA). Few correspondents established their own contacts 'in the field' and few put in the necessary legwork to check the accuracy of the news put out by government spokesmen or the local, white, press. Black political organisations and developments within the black community (at that time - 1975) received little attention and coverage from these foreign correspondents - who concentrated almost entirely on politics within the white, and franchised, community.

SANA was thus set up as a supplementary service for the correspondents from the Western media. It was intended to link together black and white newsmen and photographers into a country-wide network for an independent news-pool. It was founded as a non-profit-making agency independent of business or particular ideological or political interests. The key phrase was - independent news-gathering. Given the enormous investment in the South African economy on the part of the major Western countries - who together also monopolize the international news agencies and media - it is unreasonable to expect copy from their foreign correspondents in South and Southern Africa to present a clear and unbiased assessment of the situation in the white ruled states.

Documentation was sent out on a monthly and bi-monthly basis to international and national subscribers. Feature articles on current events were randomly sent to international journals and newspapers. The first set of documentation (September/October 1975) covered the security situation in Namibia. Subsequent editions included interviews with black leaders, reports and analysis of political trials and on the proceedings of annual conferences of black political organisations. In time it was planned to broaden the scope of the documentation to include articles on social and cultural issues. Right from the outset the Southern African News Agency was envisaged as having correspondents in every Southern African country. It was intended to provide as much coverage on the independent Southern African countries as on those under white rule.

At the end of 1975 the initiator and co-ordinator of SANA, Eric Abraham, planned a trip to Europe and Southern Africa to raise funds for the agency, arrange receiving newspapers and organisations and, more important, to contact potential correspondents in neighbouring Southern African countries. However, on the day that he was scheduled to leave Cape Town the South African Government withdrew Mr Abraham's passport and forbade him to leave the country. This was to be the first in a long line of government actions against SANA which was to culminate in its eventual collapse in December 1976.

In November of 1975 SANA's Namibian correspondent, a British subject, was expelled from Namibia. From the beginning of 1976 all editions of SANA documentation was banned by the Publications Control Board as being prejudicial to the internal security of South Africa. Distribution and re-printing of previous bulletins and

material (including photographs) they contained was thus forbidden. A number of SANA contacts and correspondents were detained in the lead up to the 'Soweto' uprisings. Harassment from right-wing extremists contributed further difficulties.

SANA and the SANA co-ordinator were supplying information and copy to the BBC Africa Service, Oslo Dagbladet, Africa Magazine and the London Guardian - amongst others, by the end of 1976. Photographs from SANA photographers were syndicated and sold by an international news-photo agency under the name SANAPIC. In June 1976 the SANA head-office was moved to Johannesburg where it operated under the direction of a freelance reporter for the Rand Daily Mail. In the country-wide crackdown which followed the Soweto uprisings several black journalists and photographers connected with SANA were interned.

Then in November 1976, shortly after articles in the Guardian and on BBC news on a strike at the majority British owned uranium mine at Rössing in Namibia, SANA co-ordinator Eric Abraham was banned and house-arrested for a five year period. A short while afterwards another reporter connected with SANA, Thenjiwe Mtintso - a former reporter on the Daily Despatch, was also house-arrested and banned.

At the beginning of December the SANA offices in Johannesburg were raided by a contingent of security police who seized every document. The SANA director and printer were threatened with executive government action should they continue running SANA. There was little alternative but to close down the agency within South Africa.

SANA was partially revived at the beginning of this year (1977) with its head-office in Geneva and under the auspices and patronage of the International University Exchange Fund. Bulletins with background news from correspondents in Southern Africa and from the South African press have been distributed on an occasional basis. But the arrangement in Geneva has always been envisaged as temporary. For both practical and policy reasons it is essential that SANA be re-established within Southern Africa.

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