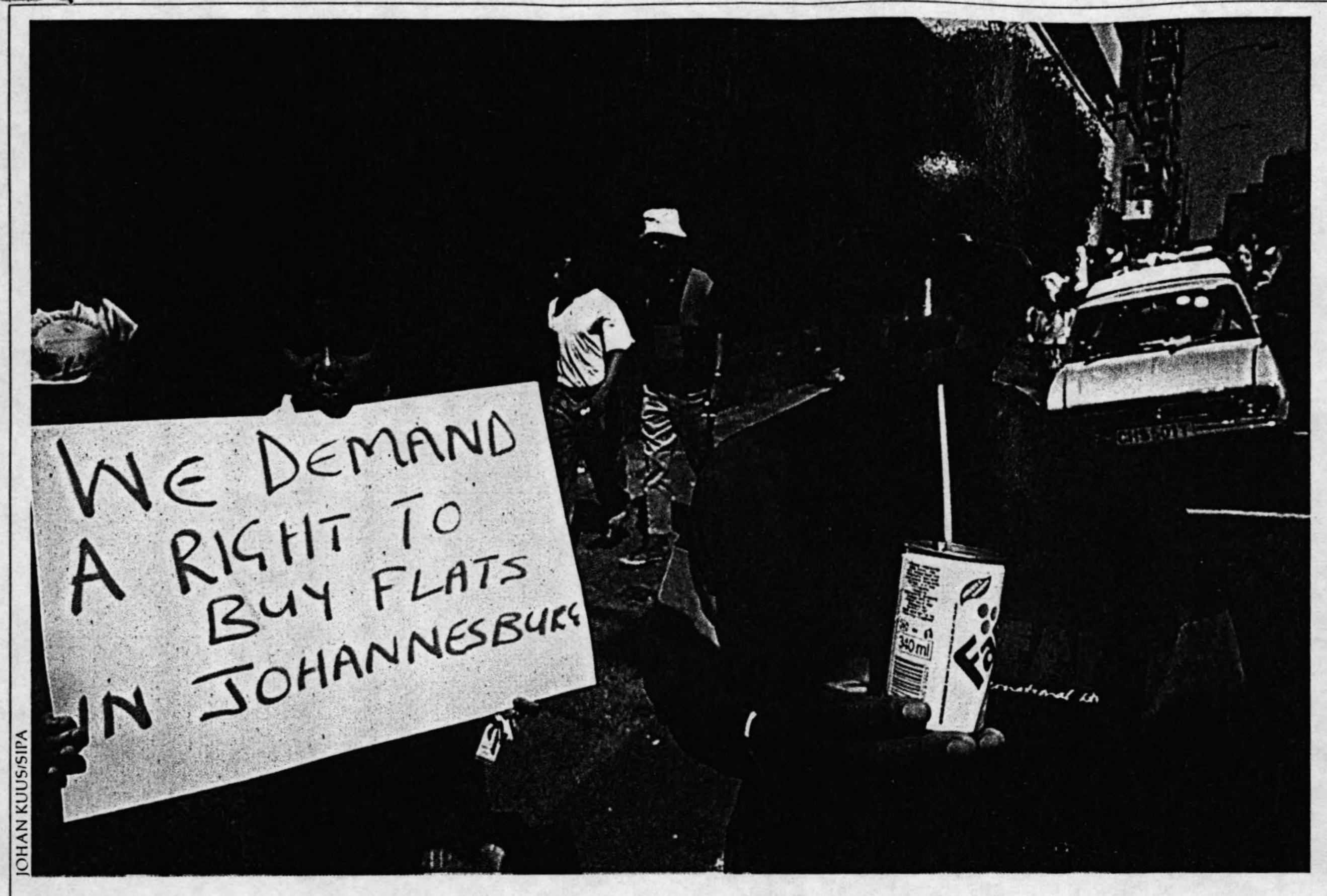
South Africa:

THE WIRITING IS ON THE WALL

Slowly, painfully, change comes to a land used to seeing life only in terms of black and white.

BY RICHARD DOWDEN



When will South Africa behave as if there is only one human race?

On my first evening in South Africa I came down to the hotel reception to find a black man collapsed across a chair, doubled up in pain. The hotel staff, mostly black, tried to find out what the matter was without perturbing the guests. The hotel is the biggest and most prestigious in Johannesburg, and there was a very smart (black) wedding reception beginning to gather in the lobby. After a few minutes an ambulance pulled up at the door, and its crew (white) rushed into the hotel. By chance they came at a moment when the staff were away from the desk, and I directed them to the black man still groaning and writhing in the chair. They went straight to him and began to examine him. They were just about to put him on the stretcher when the doorman (black) came back.

"Oh, no," he said, "It's not for him. It's for room three twenty-five." The ambulance crew abandoned the man in his chair and ran to the lift.

"Apartheid still rules, OK," I mumbled to the doorman. He shrugged. "We didn't call the ambulance for this man. He is not a guest, he is not staff. He just came in off the street. We don't know who he is or where he's from."

The doorman tried to find out from the man whether he had any medical insurance or money for a taxi to take him to a hospital. We

were just getting ready to get him into a taxi when the ambulance crew reappeared. They had been too late to save the man in room 325. They paused by the desk and saw the man in the chair. "Oh well," one of them said, "We might as well take him." And off they went!

Apartheid ambulance stories have always abounded in South Africa. Somehow, maintaining apartheid in all its pettiness, even in the face of death, showed just how poisonous and ludicrous it was. But in the old days ambulance stories showed how apartheid allowed people to die because the white ambulance would not take a black patient or, more bitterly ironic, a white died because he would not travel in a black ambulance or be treated by black medics.

These days in South Africa it is confusing. One never knows when South Africa is going to behave as if there is only one human race, or whether some apartheid monstrosity is going to rear up from nowhere to tell you that nothing has changed and there is no hope.

Although this incident appeared to end happily, the footnote is that the white guest would have been taken to a private white hospital while the black man would have gone to Johannesburg General, adequate but sparse. Apartheid still exists but, like a monstrous snowman in the sun, it is melting fast, creating weird and wonderful

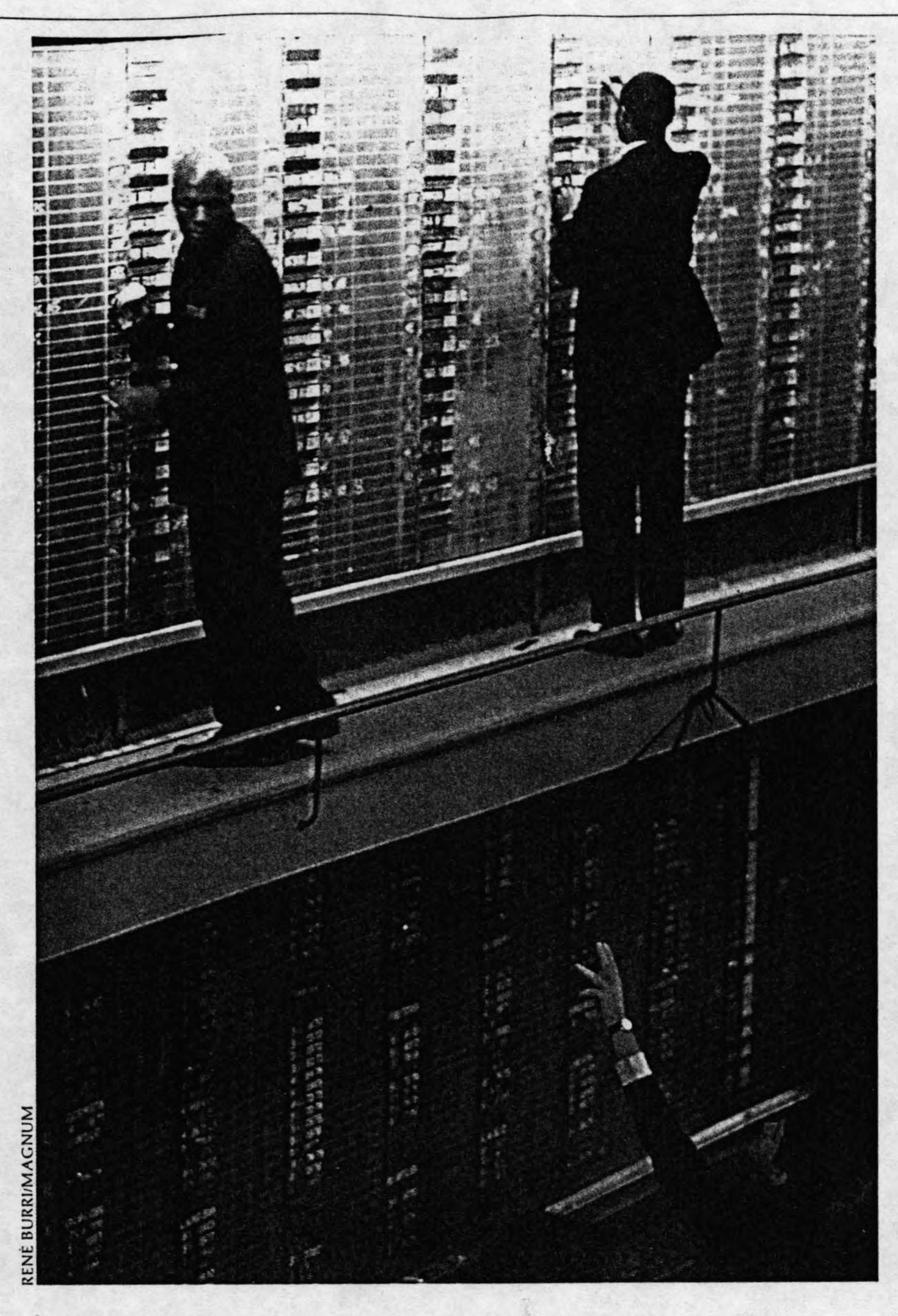
patterns as it goes.

Historians will debate till the end of time why the Afrikaners, or some of them, came to realize that they could not dominate South Africa for ever. It has been a long, slow process. An Afrikaner newspaper editor gave me a graphic description of how President F.W. De Klerk not only had to face the deep conservatism of his own constituency but, alone in his office, must feel the stern eyes of his father, his grandmother and his other ancestors glaring down on him, telling him he is giving away everything they had striven and died for.

When the National Party came to power in 1948, Afrikaners felt they had finally inherited the land promised by God but denied them by man for so long. With that election victory they felt they could finally run South Africa without interference from the British and protect their inheritance from the blacks by force of law.

For more than 300 years they had tried to escape the British. Whatever wealth there was in the country had never gone to the Afrikaner peasant farmers; it had been bought up or seized by the British. With bible in one hand and gun in the other, with their wives and children, servants and cattle, the Afrikaners journeyed by oxdrawn wagon north and east up onto the escarpment into Africa.

The Stock Exchange: the gold price is the ultimate arbiter.



The president is walking on a tightrope. Is it too late?

They escaped from the British but met Africans migrating the other

Driving on the broad tarmac road which now runs from northern Natal to Johannesburg, you can feel something of the exhilaration those Afrikaner trekkers must have felt when they emerged onto the wide, open, grassy plains gently swept by curtains of rain and teeming with wild animals. Standing here, looking west at the African sun setting behind the mountains of Lesotho, they must have felt they had arrived in the most beau-. tiful corner of God's creation.

As you leave the mountains you

cross one small stream bearing the name which every Afrikaner is taught from birth: Blood River. Here in 1838 the Afrikaners slaughtered the Zulus in their thousands. The victory is celebrated every year by a public holiday on December 16, the Day of the Covenant, the supreme symbol of white conquest of South Africa. One of the greatest tests Mr. De Klerk will face is whether he can abolish this sectarian feast or somehow transform it into a day of reconciliation.

The president is walking a tightrope. The Afrikaners, hitherto one of the most unified nations in the world, are divided. Only half of them voted for Mr. De Klerk at the last election and, if he trips or falls, more could desert the National Party for the Conservatives under Dr. Andries Treurnicht, who wants to return to classical apartheid. I asked the same newspaper editor if the Afrikaners will circle their

wagons into a laager and fight the rest of the world to the last bullet. He assured me they won't. "They know when they are beaten," he said. "They are not heroic. They have always run away when necessary, and I can hear them running now. There will be no Afrikaner last stand. They will whine and complain and hold on to what they can, but they know the days of white domination are over. I know. I am one of them."

But is it too late? Many blacks are pessimistic. They recount daily incidents of racism and rejection to demonstrate that no matter what changes are made at the top, life on the street will stay the same for them. Mandla for example is a former member of Mkhonto we Sizwe, the guerrilla army of the African National Congress. He has served a jail sentence on Robben Island for planning to cause explosions. The reason he quarrels with authority these days, however, is that he drives a new black BMW and the police are always stopping him because they think he has stolen it. Even those blacks who have made money can't enjoy it as whites do. South Africa is still a white man's country in his eyes.

Two days after Nelson Mandela was released I went to the Johannesburg Stock Exchange, a hi-tech building amid the skyscrapers of downtown Johannesburg. It could be New York or Frankfurt. Trees grow under its high glass roof and gold and glass lifts glide up and down in the interior atrium. On the floor of the stock exchange itself, men (white) in striped shirts scanned the prices on the blackboards above them or shouted prices to men (black) who ran back and forth along the catwalk chalking them up. They stood in groups, tense and nervous, stroking their chins or pulling their ears. At the center of the price boards glared a great electronic board which displays the health of South Africa, its thermometer, its ultimate arbiter: the gold price.

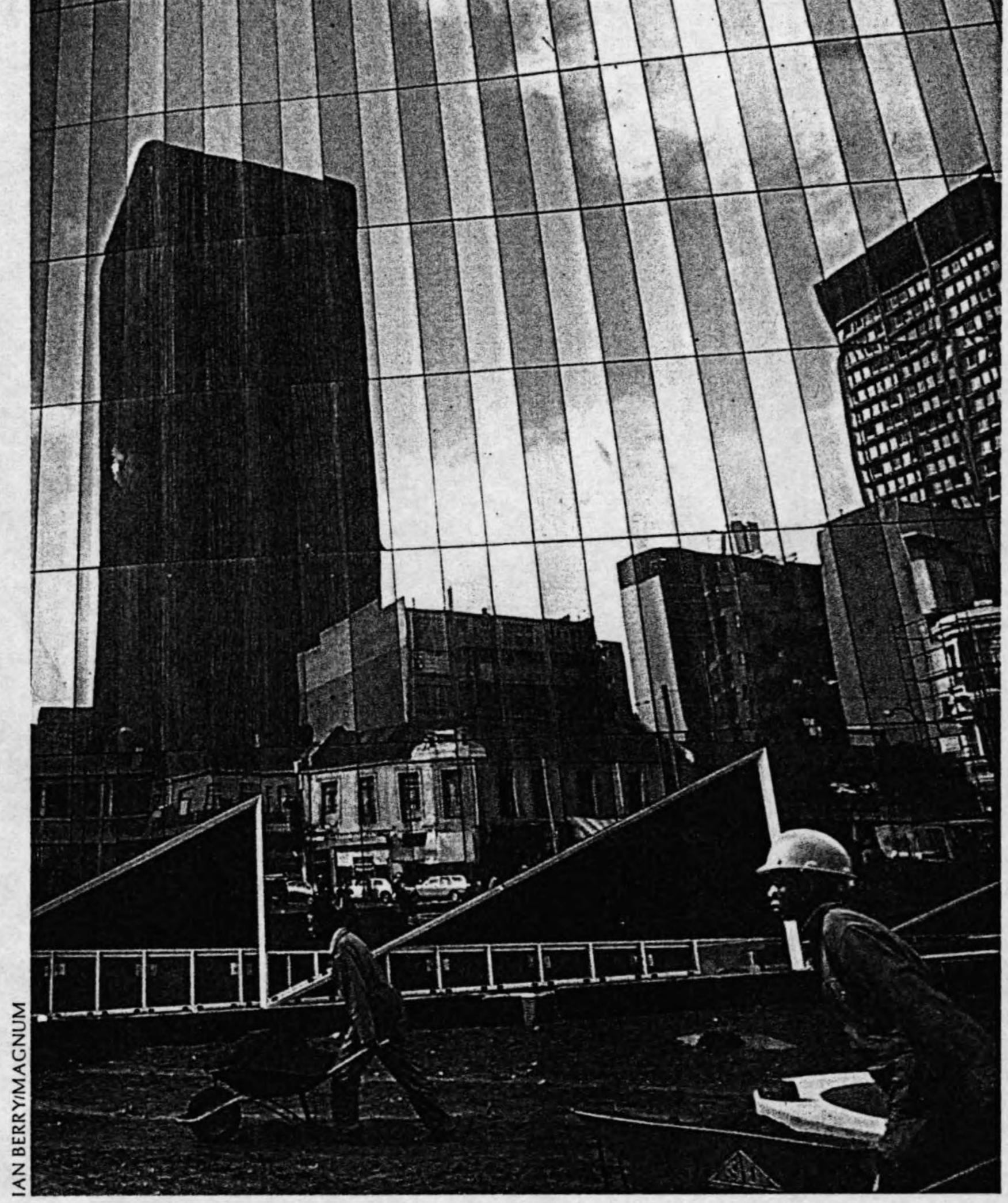
But that day another factor was worrying the brokers: Nelson Mandela. When his release had been announced the stock market had leapt in the belief that he could bring a political solution and an end to South Africa's isolation. When Mr. Mandela walked from the prison gates he called for a continuation of the armed struggle and sanctions. Worse, he called for nationalization. The stock market plummeted.

In these streets the whole saga is concentrated

I walked through its silent revolving doors out into the street. Nearby is the home of one of South Africa's biggest gold companies: Anglo American, a wall of sheer blue-green reflecting glass soaring into a clear blue sky. This is the heart of South Africa. In these few streets, half a mile from Johannesburg's busy shopping center, the whole South African saga is concentrated. Here are the headquarters of all the big mining companies. Most are huge granite classical castles suggesting permanence, security and respectability. But these streets are also a frontier. Behind them is one of the (black) bus terminals. If a black man comes from the rural areas to the city of gold in search of his fortune, this is where he will arrive. The streets are lined with petty traders selling everything from underpants to pears. They say you can be murdered for ten cents here. A man (black) was holding up three popsicles for 20 American cents each, trying desperately to attract the attention of passersby. His gestures matched perfectly those of the stock dealers a few yards away in their castle of glass, gesticulating at their colleagues and trying to sell a million dollars worth of shares. That is South Africa.

Just around the corner is John Vorster Square, home of the notorious security police headquarters. It is a place of torture and murder where prisoners and those brought in for questioning would mysteriously slip and suffer fatal head injuries in their cells or leap to their deaths from tenth-floor windows.

A few yards down Diagonal Street, the only street in Johannesburg that cuts across the rigid street grid, there is a Muti shop. Muti is traditional medicine. In this case Zulu medicine, but the Indian owner insists that all tribes and even some whites buy it. You have to stoop as you enter, as the ceiling is hung with bits of dried dead animals: monkeys, ostrich heads, eagle claws, skins of lemurs and snakes, skulls of horses and hye-



A wall of blue-green reflecting glass.

nas. Along the walls are jars and jars of powdered rocks and seeds and chips of blackened bone. Under a single dull bulb in a dingy corner a man (black) stripped to the waist pounds at a mortar and pestle. It is a nightmarish scene and the sweet smell of herbs mingles with something very unpleasant.

A man is buying a long list of items. He names them in Zulu and the Indian proprietress knows them all exactly, weighs them out carefully and makes them into little packets wrapped in newspaper. He is a regular Sangoma, or medicine man, who makes a good living in Soweto prescribing powdered snake-skin to ward off evil spirits or herbs to cure infertility. He speaks excellent English-better than the Indian lady. He tells me how wonderful Nelson Mandela's release is and how things will change now.

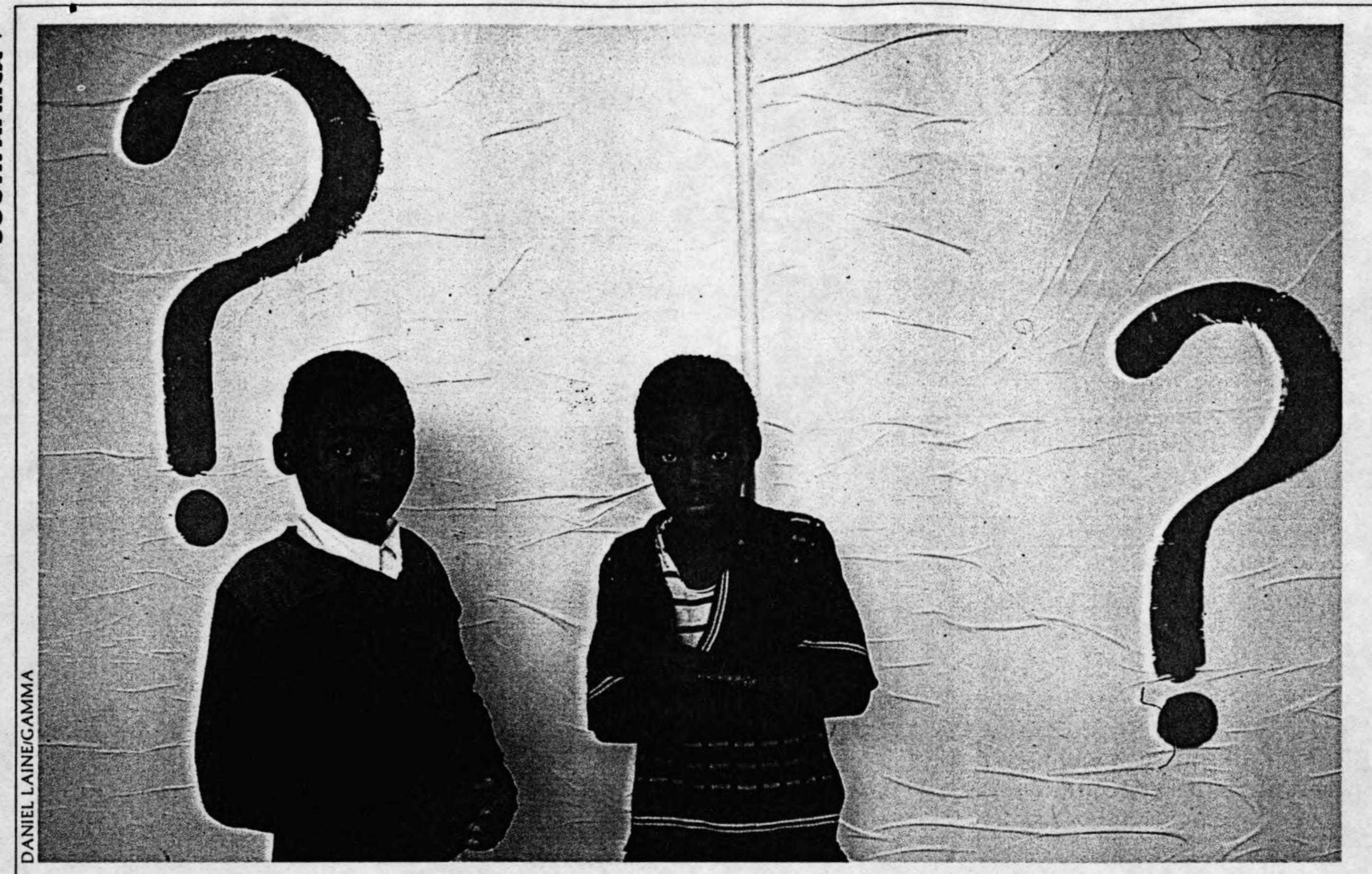
The shop assistant, an old black man with stretched earlobes, tells me that is foolish talk. "It was a big mistake to let him go, baas," he says. "This Mandela is a terrorist. He should have stayed in prison. Now he is free we will all die. You

see, baas, he thinks he can rule us but Zulus cannot be ruled by inferior people."

Is the old man telling me this because I am white? Is this what he thinks I want to hear, or does he really believe it? When his back is turned the Indian lady says: "That is the way Zulus feel. They will never accept to be equal with other blacks in South Africa."

I found this tribalism common in the townships and rural slums of Kwazulu, the Zulu homeland where those who support Nelson Mandela and the African National Congress are fighting a bloody war against Zulus who support Chief Mangosuthu Buthelezi, the leader of the Zulu Inkatha movement. Observing the appalling ferocity and bitterness of the fighting, it strikes me that this presents a far greater threat to a stable future for South Africa than the conflict between whites and blacks.

On the way to the police station at John Vorster Square, I run into a spontaneous freedom demonstration. About 70 people come down the street doing the Toyi Toyi, that strange jogging dance of singing



More questions than answers as young South Africans face the future.

Whites will have to lose some of their wealth

become the war dance of the townships. Whites looked up a little startled and got out the way but a group of white policemen watched it go by without a move. A few months ago they would have stopped it dead-even if that had meant using guns.

At John Vorster Square there is a new police poster in the window. It shows a South African policeman (white) holding the hands of two children (black) and helping them cross the road. "The police care" the poster reads. The new South Africa? The current reputation of the South African police makes this look like a sick joke-but for the moment Nelson Mandela and the ANC are taking that sort of gesture as an indication that the government is serious.

I take a taxi back to the hotel and the taxi driver (white) explains to me, as a guide would to a tourist, that blacks in South Africa are not like blacks in America. "Our blacks are not civilized at all," he says. "They are only a couple of generations out of the trees. It will take time. There's no point giving them votes now. You see, what you people from overseas don't

and slogan chanting which has understand is that we are paying for these people. Our taxes go for their schools, their hospitals, and everything. They don't do anything for themselves. And now they say they want everything from us. It's unfair."

If Mr. De Klerk and Mr. Mandela are to work out a common future for blacks and whites in South Africa they will have to overcome this sort of attitude-still shockingly common among South African whites. For any sort of political solution to satisfy South Africa's 27 million blacks, the gap between them and the country's 5 million whites will have to be narrowed. That means that initially those with money and jobs, still mostly white and heavily taxed, will have to lose some of their wealth to those without, almost all black.

But the political problem and the disparity in wealth overshadow a deeper and more intractable problem: the economy itself. True, there can be no economic solution without a political one first; but if and when Mr. Mandela leads South Africa to freedom, his first task will be to find jobs for the thousands of young blacks-and whites-leaving school each year.

Professor Sampie Terreblanche, an economist at Stellenbosch University, says South Africa's industrial heartland could be the engine which will transform the whole region, creating a southern African economic community. But South Africa is dependent on foreign capital and according to Professor Terreblanche the country needs a capital inflow of \$100 billion over the next ten years to provide a 5.5 percent growth rate to keep ahead of the 2.6 percent population increase. At present the economy is cramped by sanctions and lack of confidence. There is a net outflow of \$1.5 billion a year. "Only if Mr. Mandela asks for it can we expect it," says Professor Terreblanche, "But there is a strong incentive if we make this appeal in the context of a southern African common market."

With most Western aid donors and investors looking to Eastern. Europe these days, it seems unlikely that Professor Terreblanche's hope will be fulfilled. Yet South Africa has wealth-resources in minerals and agriculture, capital and a skilled population, and enormous potential when freed from apartheid. Perhaps it is one of the few times in history when a dominant group has prepared to share power before being forced to. A South Africa genuinely at peace with itself, the center of a region of 90 million people whose potential can only be guessed at, is a hopeful and exciting prospect.

Mr. Dowden is Africa Editor of The Independent.