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Vigilantes re-group for last Boer war

IN THE local lovers' lane in the Orange Free State mining town of Welkom, two black youngsters snuggle discreetly behind a concrete sewerage pipe, bundled in cardigans against the cold South African night.

Suddenly, they are caught in the glare of a spotlight trained on them by members of Blanke Velligheld (BV), the local Afrikaner vigilante group whose name translates as "white security".

They flee in panic across the veld, pursued by the menacing figure of Mr Hennie Steyn, who spends many of his evenings like this - chasing blacks out of town.

Furious at political reforms which have included unbanning the African National Congress (ANC), and terrified for their future under majority rule, the khaki-clad members of BV say they are ready to shed blood to prevent black radicals taking power.

The BV - which operates only in Welkom, a conservative community 200 miles south of Johannesburg - is an extreme example of the right-wing white backlash which seems to be building up against the new South Africa.

But other freelance groups could follow the BV's lead. According to Mr Eugene Terre-Blanche, leader of the ultra-right paramilitary group, the Afrikaner Weerstandsbeweging (AWB), armed "Boere commandos" have already been formed in every town in South Africa to fight those "who try with violence to remove the freedom of the volk (Afrikaner people)".

The commandos will be organised according to the military system of the old Boer republics, says Mr Robert van Tonder, leader of the Afrikaner-separatist Boerestaat Party.

Both men represent the lunatic fringe of white society, and their claims are certainly exaggerated. But even the much larger Conservative Party - which won 31 per cent of the vote in general elections last September and may have added several percentage points since then - has consistently defended the right of whites to act in "self-defence".

Pretoria is clearly concerned at the threat of white violence. Earlier this week, Mr Adriaan Vlok, the Minister of Law and Order, warned in parliament of "blood in the streets" if armed vigilantes got out of hand. And the theft last week of a large quantity of arms from Air Force headquarters in Pretoria has raised fears of armed white resistance.

Two of the men being sought in connection with the theft are former policemen, highlighting concerns that the security forces - many of whose members are politically conservative - might condone or even join vigilante groups.

Both black and white residents of Welkom say that the decision on February 2 to legalise the ANC and the release a week later of ANC deputy president Mr Nelson Mandela has led to conflict in the town and on the mines.

Last month, a black miner was beaten to death by white vigilantes with sjamboks (whips), and the local organiser of the (black) National Union of Mineworkers (NUM), Mr France Baleni, says there have been at least 20 other beatings in recent weeks. Local police say that applications for gun registrations rose from 61 in January to 640 last month. Local gun shops have sold out.

The BV leader, Mr Hennie Muller, who runs a panel-beating workshop in the local industrial area, denies that his group had done anything illegal. Mr Muller, who carries a .357 magnum pistol in a holster at his waist, admits that BV members have used sjamboks: "But we haven't assaulted any blacks in an improper or inhuman way," he insists.

He uses the ANC's commitment to armed struggle as justification for the activities of the BV - which include clearing the streets of blacks every night from 6pm to 7am, and acting as a kind of Neighbourhood Watch in white areas.

Mr Muller claims the BV's battle is with radicals, and not with blacks as such. The group aims to form an alliance between whites and conservative blacks, he says, citing his admiration for Zulu Chief Mangosuthu Buthelezi.

"I would be happy to serve under him." But he feels it necessary to add that he has a problem with integrating swimming pools: "Have you ever smelled a black?"