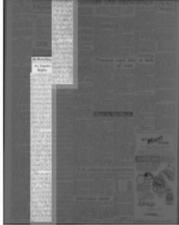




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The Straits Times Singapore, Fri., Aug. 10, 1951. An Inquiry Begins

The Straits Times, 10 August 1951, Page 6

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It is satisfactory that inquiries have been begun in respect of allegations made against the Federation Police during the trial in Kuala Lumpur of Mr. Jeffrey Watts-Carter. Some of the evidence was most disturbing, and the accusations clearly must be the subject of careful inquiry. If these inquiries indicate that action should be taken by way of prosecution, or other course, then we do not doubt that this will be done. In any case it will be the duty of the Federal Government to make the result of the inquiry known in such a manner as will convince the public that the investigation has been as exhaustive as the gravity of the accusation requires it to be. It has never been suggested that the Government is prepared to condone the use of violence or improper methods by any officer in the exercise of his authority, yet there is a suspicion, of which Government cannot be unaware, that the difficulties which the Police face in combatting terrorism tend sometimes to be regarded as justifying methods of interrogation which must always be condemned.



The severity of the penalties which the law rightly visits on terrorists and their aids and accomplices makes vigilance doubly necessary. Knowledge of these penalties should always reinforce an officer's restraint, however great the strain under which he labours and however reasonable his belief that information is being deliberately withheld. Without the co-operation of the public the identification of terrorists and their helpers is, of course, an impossible task. The Police unfortunately do not get from the public the assistance they are entitled to expect, and which it is the public's duty to give. And this is a grievous handicap, but it will not be removed if the Police themselves step outside the law which it is their responsibility to defend.



Allegations that statements have been secured from accused persons or witnesses by threat or through force unhappily are not rare. What was new was the suggestion that persons are held in "protective custody." It has not been denied that witnesses who gave evidence at the trial of Mr. Watts-Carter, and who have been in custody for many weeks, had not been charged although they had made statements incriminating themselves, nor were they detained under the formal order which must be made by the Chief Secretary twenty-eight days after arrest. The Emergency Regulations do not recognise of course, any such thing as "protective custody." It was asserted by the prosecution in this case that no witness had been improperly held, but that some of them, either too frightened to return to their homes or having nowhere to go, had chosen police protection.



Is it a likely explanation?

In any event it does not explain the circumstances of the other detentions. The inquiry now begun will, we hope, take this story of Bedrock Estate as a starting point, and explain to what extent "protective custody," with or without the consent of the person protected, has become a practice. It is only a few weeks ago since the M.C.A. suggested that





many persons held under individual orders of detention had not been given an opportunity of appearing before an appeal body, a suggestion which has been officially denied, but the Bedrock evidence provokes the uncomfortable thought that this assurance may not contain the whole truth, and that not all the facts may be known to Government.



That the interrogation of suspected persons often takes an inordinate time can hardly be disputed. At a Press conference this week, the Director of Operations disclosed that individual orders of detention have not yet been made against 375 of the persons arrested when Jenderam was razed to the ground. Preliminary interrogation has been completed, but "further interrogation" is necessary in 375 cases. The Police have had six months in which to make their enquiries. Even admitting the exceptional difficulties it seems a rather leisurely process. Or does the twenty-eight day limit not apply to mass arrests? There is certainly need for further explanation. But it is the Bedrock suspicions which have caused the real uneasiness. The inquiry must leave no aspect of this disturbing case unexplained.

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