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Situation Tense as Separatist Goes on Trial in Mississippi

By Robert C. Maynard
Washington Post Staff Writer

JACKSON, Miss.—He was dressed that morning in the late summer of 1967 in a black, gold-trimmed, hand-tailored dashiki — not very fashionable then. He strode to the microphone in a small room in Washington's Sheraton Carlton Hotel to denounce the U.S. Secretary of State, then Dean Rusk, for sending down a security man to receive a sheaf of papers.

The papers, Imari Obadele told the four reporters attending his news conference, were a request for recognition by the United States of the new "provisional government" of the Republic of New Africa, a group that hoped to carve out its own nation from five southern states.

He was proposing a plebiscite among blacks under United Nations supervision, resulting, he predicted, in the takeover by blacks of Mississippi, Louisiana, Alabama, Georgia and South Carolina.

It was an idea that was treated with levity in Washington at the time. But, as the U.S. government and the state of Mississippi began last week to prosecute Obadele—who was known in 1967 by his "slave name" of Richard Henry of Detroit—on charges of murder of a police officer and the wounding of an FBI agent and another Jackson policeman, nobody was laughing here about the Republic of New Africa. Obadele and 10 followers are being held without bail in the Hinds County Jail.

To the black community of Jackson, especially, the incident exposed a raw nerve. Relations here between blacks and the police reached a new level of hostility a year ago when Jackson city police and Mississippi highway patrolmen opened fire on the girls' dormitory at Jackson State College here, killing two black students.

Those relations remained in disrepair right up to the morning of Aug. 18 when, shortly after dawn, a task force of 10 city policemen and FBI agents attempted to serve a warrant on the "government house" of the Republic of New Africa.

FBI agents testified in a hearing Thursday that they used a bullhorn to give the occupants 75 seconds to evacuate before they began firing tear gas into the house.

The tear gas projectiles, they testified, were answered by a hail of automatic weapon fire that killed a Jackson police lieutenant and wounded two other members of the task force.

Others Rounded Up

Obadele and three other blacks who were not at the house during the raid were arrested and charged with murder along with the seven who were present. In the ensuing days, Jackson police have rounded up 10 other members of the republic on a variety of lesser charges not connected with the raid.

Now Jackson's tensions are high, again. Black leaders are comparing the incident to other raids on black militant organizations by federal and local law enforcement officials, particularly raids during the past several years on the Black Panthers.

Dr. Aaron Shirley, a black physician and prominent civil rights leader in Jackson, expressed a sentiment heard frequently here this week from many black Jacksonians.

"I am not establishment and I am not RNA," Dr. Shirley said. "I think the majority of blacks in Jackson are in the same position. But we want the world to know that we cannot have policemen making dawn raids in the black community. People who defended themselves against the police.

"They are soldiers," Obadele told the four reporters attending his news conference, were a request for recognition by the United States of the new "provisional government" of the Republic of New Africa, a group that hoped to carve out its own nation from five southern states.

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Physician's View

Another black physician, Dr. A. B. Britton, said the issue goes beyond the RNA, or even police-community relations in Jackson.

"We have to do something," Dr. Britton said, "to make the world know what black people in Mississippi are experiencing at the hands of the police, not just in Jackson but all over the state."

The white community of Jackson was having none of such talk. To many whites here the issue is simple, as expressed by the Jackson Daily News:

"The invasion of this Republic of New Africa," began a lead editorial, "has been festering so long until it was growing apparent that somebody was going to get hurt sooner or later."

The RNA, the Daily News concluded, "has no place in Mississippi, in American society, in a democracy. Let the proper authorities deal with these people in ripe fashion."

'Every Legal Means'

So the issue for many Jackson whites is a simple one of dealing with radicals with guns in a firm fashion. As one local official put it, "we tried to get rid of them by every legal means."

But to the blacks, the Aug. 18 incident, only the latest of several facedowns between Jackson police and RNA members, is part of a much more complicated problem.

Dr. Britton, chairman of the Mississippi Advisory Council to the U.S. Civil Rights Commission, said he plans to urge the commission to come to Mississippi and hold hearings.

He said he would like the hearings to encompass "the larger issues of police treatment of blacks in Jackson and the administration of justice in Mississippi."

Although only a few blacks will say it openly, there is a sentiment of support for the RNA here now because they are seen as

dele said of his followers in a recent letter from jail, "and they have been trained never to fire unless fired upon."

He said also that he had thought an understanding existed between Jackson police and his organization which was designed to avoid exactly the kind of incident that occurred on Aug. 18. The arrangement, according to Obadele, provided that a local black lawyer be notified whenever a warrant was to be served on the RNA. In that case, he said, RNA would make peaceful arrangements with the police.

Suspicion and resentment of the police, plus such RNA statements, have led many blacks to ask, as Russell Sands, a waiter did in an interview: "What business did the police have shooting up into those people's house at that hour of the morning? It don't seem right to me."

This is somewhat ironic, because the relations between the RNA and other blacks in Mississippi have not always been the best.

Squabble With Owner

The group's attempt earlier this year to buy land at Bolton, Miss., for the capital of its new nation resulted in a squabble with the black farmer from whom they were purchasing. Many local blacks sided with the farmer, finding the idea of a "new nation" a remote one in a state where at least 150,000 blacks are allegedly afraid to register to vote.

And some of the group's rhetoric was a bit strong for Mississippi blacks, to say nothing of the whites.

When police came two weeks earlier to serve another warrant, this time in the daytime, a guns-drawn situation nearly turned into a gun battle.

The RNA, in a press release, said that only nimble action by Obadele "prevented what would have been the virtual slaughter of several scores of Jackson city policemen" at the hands of the RNA security force, which was "on green alert and [had] initiated combat-win procedures."

Obadele, the press release went on, "wanted to spare the lives of white policemen who were being offered up as a sacrifice to African guns, just as other policemen had fallen in Detroit two years ago."

Tension Increases

That reference, before the Aug. 18 incident, to another gun battle between RNA forces and the police, has also served to heighten the tension here.

At the founding convention of the RNA, held in March 1969 in Detroit's New Bethel Baptist Church, a facedown between an unknown guard outside the church and two policemen ended in the death of one of the officers and the wounding of another.

More than 100 persons inside the church were subsequently arrested after hundreds of shots were fired into the church by Detroit policemen who believed the assailants were still inside.

Detroit Recorders Court Judge George W. Crockett Jr., long active in black causes, released many of those the police held, thus setting off a furious controversy in Detroit.

By comparison the controversy here is far more muted, but the underlying tensions over this second fatal incident involving the RNA are very real to Jacksonians.

Committee Formed

The Aug. 18 shootings brought together several of the best-known black physicians and ministers who formed a committee, Black Jacksonians for Justice, to appeal for a change in the administration of justice here.

The entire chain of events is the result of incidents involving a group that one black lawyer described as "a splinter of a splinter group."

RNA's exact membership is impossible to determine, but one lawyer who has worked with the group doubts that its membership exceeds 50 at this point.

When Obadele came to Washington that morning in 1967, the organization had several hundred members and Robert F. Williams as its president-in-exile.

The intervening years were not kind to the RNA and its idea of a separate state. It was an idea that had been developed by Obadele and his older brother, Milton Henry, a prominent Detroit lawyer.

Disagreed on Move

But they disagreed over the idea of moving to the South, with Milton Henry arguing that the group needed a strong northern urban base.

In time, Obadele declared his brother "suspended" from the organization. There were others—Robert Williams among them—who also left for one reason or another.

By the time the organization reached Mississippi earlier this year, its membership, its support and its influence had declined sharply.

Now Obadele and his followers face the possibility of the death sentence for murder. Jack Travis, the Hinds County district attorney who was defeated for re-election Tuesday, had hinted in an election eve statement that treason might be added to the charges.

One of the lawyers handling the preliminary stages of the defense shook his head when asked about the treason charges.

"I haven't heard anything more about treason charges since the election," said civil rights lawyer Fred L. Banks Jr. "Aren't things bad enough already?"