

permitted to have an adult at home because I was under house arrest and speaking to me was tantamount to having leprosy – you were infecting yourself because you were bound to be arrested. So I ended up not communicating with people, trying to protect them. This even applied to my own family. I could not even take the children to my sister.

I did not know what my fate would be because we were part of an experiment – the first ever to be detained under Section 6 of the then Terrorism Act. They were using me as a barometer, a political barometer. If they could arrest this number one terrorist and number one terrorist's wife then they could measure the political heat in the country and how the country was going to react. After Madiba's arrest, he was in prison for life and I was this 'communist' who was continuing where others had left off. So arresting me was the highest point in their lives – they knew they had completely thwarted opposition to their nationalist government policies. I was aware that I was being used as a barometer to test the reaction of the country. If they could take his wife, when there was so much noise when he was arrested and jailed for life, what did the nationalists have to worry about thereafter? They were going to just sit back and rest and rule forever.

So I was arrested in that atmosphere and I knew my fate was in those people's hands and I knew no one would have the courage to open their mouth because apartheid meant murder in those days. If you dared oppose the nationalists, you were dead. Once this lawyer came to me at midnight to find out how I could help him leave the country. I was doing a lot of that in those days. The Security Branch happened to get this information and they detained him in John Vorster Square. The following day he was dead. That is how vicious apartheid was then – our lives were nothing.

When we arrived at Pretoria Central Prison, we were all held in a certain section of the prison. Then I was removed and placed on death row, in that cell with three doors – the grille door, then the actual prison door and then another grille door. The sound of that key when they opened the first door, the first grille door, was done in such a way that your heart missed a beat and it was such a shock. You had been all by yourself with dead silence for hours and hours and hours and suddenly there would be this K-AT-LA, K-A-T-L-A. That alone drove you beserk; that alone was meant to emphasise the fact that 'we are in control, not only of your being, but your soul as well and we can destroy it'. Solitary confinement is worse than hard labour. When you do hard labour you are with other prisoners, you can tolerate it because you all dig together, you communicate and you are alive. Solitary confinement is meant to kill you alive. It is the most vicious punishment that you could wish on your worst enemy.

You are imprisoned in this little cell. When you stretch your hands you touch the walls. You are reduced to a nobody, a non-value. It is like killing you alive. You are alive because you breathe. You are deprived of everything – your dignity, your everything.

We were held incommunicado. We were not allowed to even see a lawyer. In those days we were completely at their mercy. Some families never knew that their loved ones died after they were detained. We were lucky to be alive and it was purely because of my name that I survived because the easiest thing for them at the time would have been to kill me, which they threatened every day. 'Oh you're still alive?' They would come in every day and say, 'You're still alive? We don't know if you will be alive tomorrow.'

They honestly believed that it was impossible for a black woman to have this kind of stamina, to be this stubborn. Because they were meant to break us and they could not believe that anyone would resist them like that?

When we were released the first time I had red lips from pellagra and my skin was peeling because even when you tried to eat you brought up because you were very, very hungry. We were supposed to be awaiting-trial prisoners but they did not treat us as such. Our lawyers had to make an application to the Supreme Court for us to be brought food and then when they brought this food if it was bread they would break the bread. They were searching to see if there was anything hidden in it. They would break the fruit open so you got your food in pieces – just to humiliate you and to show that you are a nobody. They reduced you to such levels.

They still searched you in your cell despite the fact that you had nothing other than the clothes you were wearing, two blankets and a mat. We had a plastic bottle with two-and-a-half litres of water for the whole day. That was your ration for the day and you drank from the bottle – there was no glass, you drank from that. Then you wiped your face with that and you just wiped your armpits and yourself. One of our lawyers, George Bizos, had to apply for us to wash. An application had to be brought before the Supreme Court for months to allow us to wash properly.

Solitary confinement was designed to kill you so slowly that you were long dead before you died. By the time you died, you were nobody. You had no soul anymore and a body without a soul is a corpse anyway. It is unbelievable that you survived all that. When I was told that most of my torturers were dead, I was so heartbroken. I wanted them to see the dawn of freedom. I wanted them to see how they lost their battle with all that they did to us, that we survived. We are the survivors who made this history.

When I was in detention for all those months, my two children nearly died. When I came out they were so lean; they had had such a hard time. They were covered in sores, malnutrition sores. And they wonder why I am like I am. And they have a nerve to say, 'Oh Madiba is such a peaceful person, you know. We wonder how he had such a wife who is so violent?' The leadership on Robben Island was never touched; the leadership on Robben Island had no idea what it was like to engage the enemy physically. The leadership was removed and cushioned behind prison walls; they had