

Daily News Tuesday November 4, 2008

TIRELESS FIGHTER FOR DIGNITY GONE

A tribute to Billy Nair, a Civic rights activist

BILLY Nair was the founding member of the Durban Central Residents' Association (DCRA), which was formed in April 1984, barely two months after his release from Robben Island, where he served 20 years as a political prisoner.

The DCRA later assumed the name: the Organisation of Civic Rights (OCR), with Nair serving as its first deputy chairperson and, 12 years later, as its patron, always actively involved for almost 25 years.

The OCR was one of the many community organisations he invested his time in, as he did in political, trade union and government structures.

In 1984, under Nair's leadership, the Group Areas eviction in Warwick Avenue was stopped.

Other campaigns were organised, that included rallying tenants and residents against the opening of a bottle store and to address drug trafficking and crime.

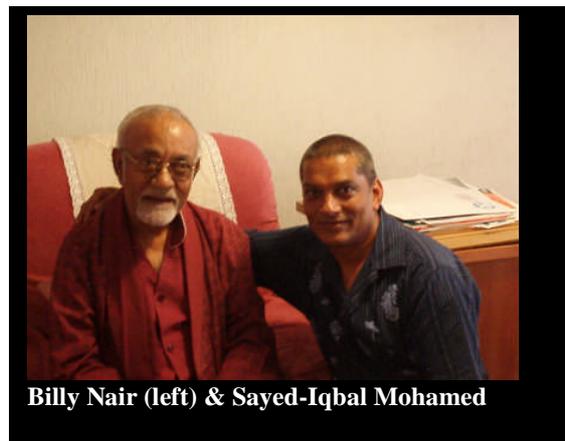
Through house visits later that year (1984), only one person of the several

thousand registered voters in and around Warwick Avenue, voted for the apartheid government's Tri-Cameral parliament.

In 1985, the Rent Board admitted that in its entire history of 60 odd years, it sat the longest on a single matter that lasted about seven days.

Nair represented himself and other tenants of Himalaya House, together with an attorney. He did not allow the Rent Board to roughshod over tenants and dispense with justice in a few hours, as the board was accustomed to.

He was thorough in his preparation and skilful in cross-examination of the landlord's legal representative.



Billy Nair (left) & Sayed-Iqbal Mohamed

As a member of parliament, he made sure that people had more than a say in giving direction to policies and legislation.

He used to meet regularly with the then Minister of National housing, Sankie Mthembu-Mahanyele and brought her to Durban to meet with the OCR, which started a process of changing the law for tenants and landlords.

Millions of renters and landlords / landladies owe a big debt to Nair for the transformation of the law into the Rental Housing Act 50 of 1999, and the provincial Rental Housing Tribunals.

His concern a few months ago was the Tribunals' failure to address the plight of the poor tenants and the exorbitant rent increases granted by the Tribunals, particularly in KwaZulu Natal.

As a civic activist he did not neglect his political commitment and organised meetings even when the apartheid government had banned such meetings. Nair was actively involved and present at these meetings, sometimes in disguise because the security forces were looking for him.

Nair's involvement with the OCR and other grassroots structures meant a genuine commitment, and he gave everything of himself to the organisations to ensure the poor were

helped and their rights respected as dignified beings.

Once, Nair together with Pravin Gordhan and Mo Shaik who, if arrested then, would have all been charged for high treason, met me at great risk to themselves, to warn the OCR about certain persons who had infiltrated the organisation.

The three risked their lives, but such was their commitment to establishing the ethos of human rights for all South Africans that scant regard was given to their own safety.

Nair was firm on corruption, with no compromise. He responded promptly to any request, always courteous and professional in the way he handled a matter. He followed up on matters and kept one informed.

He used to be in parliament very early each day, working on community issues and fulfilling his parliamentary commitments. He was industrious even though his health was failing him.

Nair engaged with every child with his heart, mind and soul as he did on every matter he was involved in.

He lived a simple life to the very end; free from the luxuries and the rat race that have trapped some of the great struggle heroes. He was what Karl Marx theorised and dreamt of, and

personified the social values leaders would want us to embrace.

South Africans are indebted to Nair, a gentle giant: selfless, honest, humble, simple, loving, caring, dedicated, who lived for the welfare and wellbeing of others.



Dr. Sayed Iqbal Mohamed, Chairperson, Organisation of Civic Rights; member of the Council of Canadian Administrative Tribunals.