16 June 1976

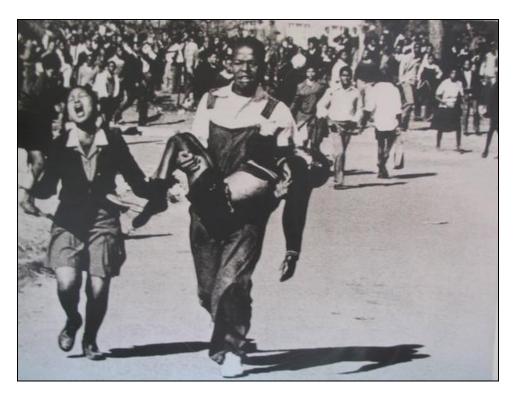## Soweto students march against government's language policy

June 16 commemorates a dark day in South Africa's history. It was 1976, the Apartheid era in South Africa – a government edict was issued stating that Afrikaans would be the universal language of instruction in black schools.

On 16 June 1976, a large band of school children gathered in Orlando, Soweto to march in protest against this government edict.

During the protest, police started firing live ammunition on the children.

According to Sam Nzima, a journalist that witnessed the scene:

"I saw a child fall down. Under a shower of bullets I rushed forward and went for the picture. It had been a peaceful march, the children were told to disperse, they started singing Nkosi Sikelele. The police were ordered to shoot."
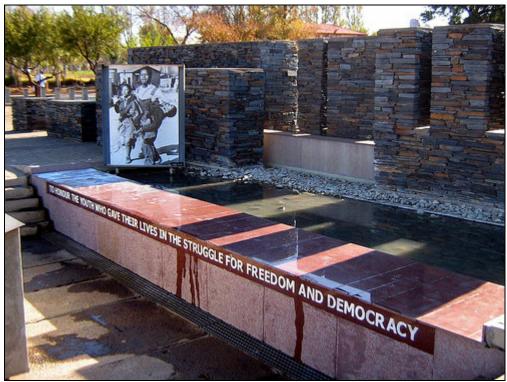

Nzima captured a photo of Hector Pieterson just seconds after he was shot and was being carried to a vehicle to take him to a nearby clinic. His sister was running alongside.

Although Pieterson may not have been the first student shot, this photo has become an icon of this tragic event, where many school children were shot by the police.

Violence and protests spread throughout the country after this in a revival of the resistance movement. In the weeks that followed over 700 people were reported to have been killed – mostly youth.

Youth day serves to remind South Africa of the importance of her youth in shaping the future and as a somber reminder that an event, like the Soweto uprising should never happen again.

Hector Pietersen Museum in Soweto
The memorial marks the spot, roughly, where Pietersen was shot on 16 June 1976.

"We can only succeed as a nation if we build one another and build our country together."

Nelson Mandela on South Africa Youth Day, 1995.

Youth Day

Why had school children gathered in Soweto on 16 June 1976?

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How did this event become a tragedy in South Africa's history?

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Who was Hector Pietersen?

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Why is Youth Day celebrated as a public holiday?

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