

JOHANNESBURG , South Africa

-- South Africa's largest newspaper says the country is facing a state of emergency following a surge of child rapes.

"South Africa's infants are under siege. Now is the time for President Thabo Mbeki to break his silence on the abomination destroying not only the country but eating away at our nation's soul," the Sowetan newspaper said in a front page editorial on Monday.

Its call came after more cases of infant sexual abuse were reported over the weekend

"If it means declaring a state of emergency, so be it," the newspaper continued.

"Unless Mbeki can offer something more effective, then suspending aspects of the constitution seems the only way.

"The president is called upon to declare war on crime in no less a measure than his counterpart President George W. Bush of the U.S. did when he declared war on terrorism.

"Bush acted with swiftness and firmness to restore faith in America -- South Africa expects nothing less of Mbeki," it said.

Abuse in spotlight

Local newspapers reported at least two more infant-rape incidents at the weekend, including one involving an eight-month-old baby in the Western Cape province.

The sexual abuse of toddlers was thrown into the spotlight earlier this month by the alleged gang rape of a nine-month-old baby girl by six men.

The rapes have shocked a country already numbed by one of the highest rates of violent crime in the world.

Thousands marched in Cape Town on Sunday to protest against sexual violence, with many calling for the death penalty for the six men accused of raping the baby girl.

"Kill the abusers!" one angry group shouted at the accused, who are aged between 24 and 66.

The baby's 16-year-old mother had left her in the care of a friend.

About 21,000 cases of child rape were reported to the police in the past year, most committed by male relatives of the victims.

The attacks are fuelled by the myth that sex with a virgin will protect a man against AIDS or even cure him of the incurable disease.