

A tragic loss

Delegate gunned down days after conference



Prince Mhlambi

THE success of the policing conference was marred by the news of the violent death just two days afterwards of Prince Mhlambi, 23, a delegate who had spoken about police-community relations in Phola Park at the conference. He was assassinated by unknown gunmen in Thokoza.

In his address he described how various efforts by Phola Park residents to improve relations with the police had disintegrated.

Initially a forum consisting of residents of the Phola Park civic committee and the police had reached several agreements:

- that before any police units moved in Phola Park they would sign in at the civic committee's office;
- the person in charge would introduce himself; Casspirs and police vehicles would have registration plates for identification;
- a telephone would be installed in the civic office and police officers would give their emergency phone numbers to the civic.

Mhlambi said these arrangements had worked successfully for some time, but problems occurred, particularly as a result of different police units being used which did not feel bound by the agreements reached with the Phola Park civic. The final breakdown in police-community relations came when a police general in Pretoria ordered the police to cancel the agreements immediately.

With hindsight it might be ironic, or highly significant, that in his address to the conference Mhlambi had commented that such negotiations with the police also put the lives of community leaders in jeopardy due to raised expectations among the residents which were often dashed.

"When something else happened than what the leaders had

promised them, the leaders lost credibility... Later the mistrust was so big that the members of the civic committee were suspected of co-operating with the police as police informers." Mhlambi added that it appeared that in some cases the rumours were initiated

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and supported by the police themselves.

He said this sequence of events had led to the death of two civic leaders - Harris Booie and Johnson Madiga - and to the end of the organised representation of the residents in a civic committee.

Offering recommendations as to a way forward for police-community relations in Phola Park, Mhlambi said it would not be easy to get any of the leadership back to the negotiating table but it was a necessity.

He added that a new monitoring council should be established with representatives from the police, the churches,

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course of the conference, included questions of greater police accountability to South African society, the demilitarisation of the police force, the democratisation of the force through a "flattened" command structure and improved pay and career prospects for police officers.

The context in which all these changes needed to occur was not an easy one, however, as Idasa policy and planning director Dr Van Zyl Slabbert pointed out when he focused on the process of transition in South Africa.

For negotiations to succeed, a relatively stable socio-political environment was needed, yet the very agents responsible for maintaining law and order, the police, have been part of the confrontation that preceded negotiations. Therefore, in order to play an effective stabilising role the police themselves needed their own transition - a process of depoliticisation so that they might become acceptable enforcers of stability.

The rising levels of criminal violence which co-existed with political and factional violence further complicated the transition. According to Dr Slabbert, if bodies such as the National Peace Accord or the Goldstone Commission were even to be remotely effective, a rapid improvement in police-community relations was urgently needed.

Dr Slabbert said the civil service had been "meticulously created" to pursue certain constitutional goals that had now been abandoned. However, when politicians abandoned such goals it took time for the civil service to turn around.

"There is nothing as unhappy as a civil servant without a sense of purpose," he said. "We compound the difficulty of the transition by not taking the civil service seriously. It needs to function during the transition. I appeal to the politicians: don't leave the civil servants without a sense of purpose. There are no other civil servants waiting



Former Broederstroom trialist and MK member Ian Robertson with police public relations chief Col Dave Bruce.

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could happen. Citing a long list of changes that were necessary in order to ensure that the police served society, Harding emphasised the need for a new approach to and understanding of discipline.

Remarking on drills he had observed in SAP colleges (and other police academies round the world), he exhorted the police to distinguish between discipline and regimentation.

"Discipline is discipline of the self: to study, a desire to be professional and to serve. Discipline has a new face, we must throw out the old one!"

The police should be "progressive, visionary and capable of responding to linkages between economic, social and political demands", said Harding. Flexibility and versatility were essential ingredients.

"The police executive tradition of boldly leading the police force into the past has got to die!" Instead, he added, the motto of the modern police officer should be: "my interest is in the future because I'm going to spend the rest of my life there".

Harding was also adamant that there should be no support for secretive policing in a democracy.

"We need to remember that within a democracy - which is a very demanding process - we cannot discharge our duties without the public's consent to do so on their behalf."

He added that police officers at all levels should not turn a blind eye to police wrongdoing and reminded them that they were not above the law.

"We must condemn it, oppose it, challenge it and deal with it... If you do not do so, do not delude yourself that you will secure the public trust."

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trade unions, business people and local government structures. In addition, the local police forces should be ordered to be bound by whatever agreements were reached.

"What has to be achieved is constant contact and a relationship between the police and the residents on a social basis. This means that the same persons must be stationed in this community on a longterm basis, and get into contact with the people, not only in crisis situations, but in everyday life in a positive way."

Change: police urged not to go it alone

It was clear at the conference that the new language of change has become part of official police parlance. However, as Canadian police chief Jim Harding said, it was one thing to "talk the talk", the SAP now needed to "walk the walk".

Time and again during the conference speakers emphasised that irrespective of their merits, any reforms to police-community relations introduced unilaterally by the police would be in vain unless the communities they were designed to serve were consulted.

On the surface it would seem that the rhetoric of change was shared by police and their critics. In his address, Deputy Minister of Law and Order Gert Myburgh spoke of the need for an holistic approach to crime and violence and the multi-dimensional model of community policing which the SAP was adopting.

Community policing, he said, comprised four associated elements: community based crime prevention; proactive servicing as opposed to emergency response; public participation in the planning and supervision of police operations; and the shifting of command responsibility to lower level ranks.

Acknowledging that the police had become "estranged from large segments of society over the years", Mr Myburgh said the SAP had a strategic plan for reform and restructuring which would give "considerable attention" to the poor image of the police.

Calling for a partnership between the police and the community, Mr Myburgh spoke of the need for the police to be "peace officers" and to engage in "interactive policing". He said the SAP was working towards a changed organisational structure in which the para-military model was surrendered for a flatter profile.

Chief of police in KwaZulu, Major-General Jac Buchner, also emphasised the need for police to serve those communities with which they were familiar and, despite a wary look over his shoulder at the deputy



BUCHNER: police must serve in communities they know.

minister, criticised the standard procedure in which police were recruited from one part of the country and then stationed in another area with which they had no affinity and little understanding or knowledge.

However, all the talk of change prompted Janine Rauch of the Project for the Study of Violence at Wits University to ask the deputy minister to acknowledge that this new language had not origi-

nated solely from within the SAP, and that the police needed to work *with* others in the process of change.

Bringing the conference to a close Dr Van Zyl Slabbert again drove home the point that the police could not act alone.

'The police need to realise that political change in South Africa is not an enemy'

"Whatever else you do as we go through the transition, you will not be able to pull yourselves up by your own bootstraps. You cannot effect change on your own," he said.

Just as there were now forums in which housing, electrification and politics were negotiated, so there should be forums in which politicians and the police could engage each other and in which the police and the community could develop joint strategies.

Stressing the need for shared decision-making Slabbert said: "There can be no development without an interim government in South Africa, but I cannot see an interim government going about its business effectively without stability in our society."

Fink Haysom of the ANC's constitutional committee said the police needed to realise that political change in South Africa was not an enemy but offered a future full of more creative opportunities than they had had until now.