

This legacy will be with us for some time to come. It would be naive, therefore, to expect the police to immediately become accustomed to playing a conflict-solving role when history has made them one of the parties in conflict.

Another potential source of conflict is the increasing awareness of personal and fundamental rights among the public. To some police officers, this constitutes a challenge to authority and they feel compelled to respond by exerting more authority, at times through the use of force.

The interim Constitution is the supreme law of the land. We are in government to uphold the law. The Constitution says, among other things, that workers have a right to strike as part of the collective bargaining process.

Recently truck drivers decided to exercise this right by blockading highways because that is their workplace. A snap debate was introduced in parliament on the issue.

After the debate I asked the Commissioner of the SAPS to send the police to the highways: Transport Minister Mac Maharaj and Labour Minister Tito Mboweni were going there to negotiate with truck drivers and their employers, and I considered it important for the police to be there as observers.

It is now a matter of record that the conflict was resolved because both the employers and the union agreed on the formation of an industrial council. Negotiations would continue within that framework.

I have yet to receive a report from the police officers commanding the units deployed on the highway, but from that report I will assess the extent to which they learnt from the negotiations facilitated by the two ministers.

However, there are times when members of the public exercise their rights in a manner which does not suggest sufficient appreciation of the rights of others.

These cases include situations in which striking workers believe, quite erroneously, that their right to picket entitles them to use force to prevent others from doing business with the companies they work for. This explains why neutral third party intervention will remain necessary for some time to come.

The role to be played by service organisations cannot be confined to mediations, given the picture I have just painted. It will have to be extended in a big way to include education and training. And I see the major stakeholders in matters of safety and security, namely the police and the broader community itself, as the prospective students.

The following story illustrates this point. An activist told me he was trying to set up a community-police forum in White City, Soweto. He complained that the station commander was not co-operating with him in this regard: he was being reactionary. In fact, said the activist, the station commander was undermining the RDP because he disagreed with the activist's suggestions.

This points to the important role to be played by service organisations in encouraging a more nuanced, sophisticated and profound interpretation of some of the important things that are being

page 22

Police, community at odds in Harare

By Sobantu Xayiya

THE call for greater co-operation between police and communities is clouded by the mist of the past. Many communities are still haunted by experiences of harsh police treatment and as a result remain sceptical of working relations between them and law enforcement agencies. Attempts to draw them into contributing towards the process of reconstruction are therefore often unsuccessful.

Harare, a site-and-service squatter settlement on the fringes of Khayelitsha in Cape Town, is one of many communities struggling with this legacy in relation to co-operation with the police. For most of its residents, the line between past and present police services is blurred, if not non-existent.

Residents have been locked in a bitter struggle with the authorities over a police station built for the area in 1992. The squatters demanded that the structure be converted into a hospital, which they identified as a facility more urgently required in the area. According to some, residents were never consulted, or informed, about plans to build the police station in 1992.

After a series of confrontations, the authorities responded by starting to build a hospital - opposite the police station. The hospital is nearing completion but the police station is still not functioning, as residents remain implacably opposed to its presence. The police station is deserted. The only people there are two police guards.

Most of the people I spoke to see the police station as a potential threat to their survival. "Should it start functioning, we stand to lose greatly," is the view of one resident, a man who makes a living by smuggling dagga. He says unemployment and inadequate skills are the reasons for his illegal line of work.

But it is not only the police station that is disturbing many Harare residents. It is the whole idea of community policing. They are far better informed than the police about who is involved in illegal businesses. But the shared need to make a living somehow, in the context of massive unemployment, is behind their unwillingness to respond positively to the call for greater co-operation with the police.

For example, there is the man who says he survives by stealing cars and selling them. Like most self-confessed thieves, he sees himself as a Robin Hood. He does not steal from township residents, whom he regards as poor like himself: his "business" operations are conducted outside the townships. Naturally, he cannot imagine co-operating with police.

Nor can the taxi driver whose vehicle is not roadworthy. Plagued by traffic fines, he is opposed to co-operation with the police on the grounds that it would "complicate" his life.

Harare is no different from any other squatter settlement in the Peninsula. Most residents come from the Eastern Cape (recorded as the region hardest hit by unemployment) in search of jobs. Unable to find employment, they seek alternative ways of making a living.

Harare residents make it clear that they believe in democracy. But, to most of them, the idea that the police are a vital component of democracy is inconceivable at this stage. The bottom line is survival. ■

to peace