

An interview used in "Attacking the Heart of Apartheid: The ANC's MK Special Operations Unit" (Penguin, 2025), Yunus Carrim

MK Special Operations Unit Project

Interviews

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You knew comrades who were active in Special Ops. What was its specific role, as you understand it?

Well, I wasn't involved in the Special Ops, as you know. There was a separation between the Political and the Military, and I was in the Political Section. After the Kabwe Conference (in 1985), I became chair of the joint Political-Military Committee in Swaziland. But my committee was not involved in Special Ops.

The Political and Military Sections were separate. At Kabwe (the ANC's 1985 Kabwe Conference) it was decided to join them and have one person chairing. All I know about Special Ops is that Joe Slovo and Rashid were leading it. We were not very much in contact with them. We knew there was Special Ops that was going on. I knew that Hélène Passtoors was part of Special Ops with her husband Klaas.

How did you know?

Well, it was common knowledge for us in Maputo that she was involved. She was going in and out of the country taking in arms, setting up caches.

But if you were in separate Political and Military structures until 1985 how was it possible for you to know Hélène was so involved in Special Ops? And what about the 'need to know' basis on which both the Political and the Military operated?

It was common knowledge.

Common knowledge, how?

If you asked comrades who was head of a unit in Maputo, you soon found out that these are the people Joe (Slovo) is using. But when I became friendly with Hélène, she never discussed her operations with me. But she hinted that she

worked with Joe. He had also asked her to go and base herself inside South Africa permanently.

That was later. Anyway, can you recall who told you that Hélène was working for Special Ops?

Well, Indres (Naidoo) and Sunny (Singh) spoke about it. They said she was working with Joe. Once you say people are working with Joe, you knew exactly that it's for Special Ops.

I also know that Hélène was very upset about the deaths and injuries in the Pretoria (South African Air Force) bombing, and she had to see Oliver Tambo to calm her down, and this was common knowledge.

But when she went into the country, I can tell you that she was under surveillance.

Already?

Already.

You mean even before she went in?

It may be before she went, but when she got in, she was staying in Yeoville. But the police had a flat right opposite her flat so they could watch her movements.

I also went into the country.

Your mission?

It was to contact all the underground people, underground structures. Speak to them to prepare for the Kabwe Conference and also to get a sense of how strong they were.

Was that for the country as a whole or just Natal?

No, just Natal. But then I lost contact with Swaziland. And somehow I knew the phone number of Hélène.

How did you get her number? Before she left for South Africa, she was staying with you so maybe she gave you the phone number then?

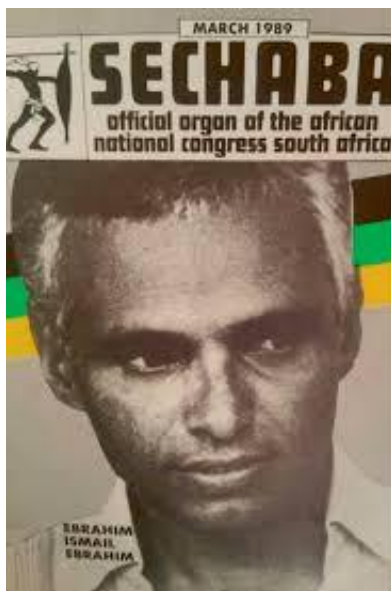
How would she know the phone number because she would only have a landline number after she rented a flat in South Africa? There were no cell phones. So she got me the phone number after.

Would Rashid have given it to you?

No, I contacted her and I wanted her to go to Swaziland with some reports and particularly to get money for me because I ran out of cash. I went over to Johannesburg. She met me. At that time the police didn't know who I was. It took them a long time to find out. Then the police were able to trace me to Durban, and that is how people like Mo (Shaik, ANC underground operative) and them had got involved. If I hadn't gone there, I don't think that they would have picked me up at all.

So you think that rather than you being tailed and her getting vulnerable, it was she who was being tailed and by you contacting her, you made your unit vulnerable?

Exactly.



**Ebrahim Ismail Ebrahim,
1980s, Sechaba**

Now coming back to Special Ops. What more can you say about its specific aims?

Special Ops was to hit big spatial targets like Sasol and other targets. It was a unit on its own. They would attack high profile targets - Sasol, Koeberg, Voortrekkerhoogte and so on.

They had a selected group of people. They would, first of all, try to get in arms into the country. Then attack their targets. Their special targets were to increase the importance of armed propaganda as part of the struggle.

How successful do you think they were?

They were quite successful, especially with Sasol. They targeted it more than once. But they made a big mistake. When they targeted Sasol the first time they took a certain route out of the country to Swaziland. When the security police arrested someone, that person informed the police of the route they took. When Special Ops hit Sasol again, the police monitored that particular route. That's how they ambushed them and killed them.

You're referring to the November 1985 killing of Barney Molokoane, Victor Khayiyana and Vincent Sekete?

Yes. The police knew that when they attacked Sasol before, they avoided the main routes out of the country to Swaziland out, but they took a different route. The police then targeted that route. They knew that these comrades would come this way.

Of the people you knew in Special Ops, who stands out for you?

There was comrade Ernest Pule. And Barney and the others who were killed. But also Rashid, who worked very secretively. He wouldn't want to expose his people, which is quite correct. We had 'the need to know' approach, which was strictly observed because if people are arrested, they wouldn't know too much that the security police can torture them to get. So, we only came to know what we needed to. There may have been loose gossip here and there. Joe was the head and, of course, his main person was Rashid, and he had under him a whole command system.

The other MK units were easily captured. We had a lot of arguments when I was in Swaziland because the funds came to me when I was chairing the Political-Military Committee. I had to decide what amount of funds would go into the Military and what would go to the Political and my view was, at that time, that the Political was the main form of struggle and I should channel most of the funding to the Political. There was always an argument because the Military would say they needed more funds, actually the greater portion of the funds because they had to smuggle in weapons. In some cases, ja, they needed more resources. But I must say that I felt it's the political struggle that was the main struggle. And the armed action must also act in the terms of the political struggle. For instance, if there's a rent boycott then they need to attack the rent offices. There has to be a link between the military and political struggles, which most of the time didn't happen.

These are understandable conflicts over the allocation of resources. When you talk about the Military, are you referring to MK as a whole, including Special Ops?

No, no, I had nothing to do with allocation to Special Ops.

So, they didn't get any money from the budget allocated to the Swaziland PMC?

Yes, they had a separate fund.

Cde Ebie, you are, of course, highly respected in the movement and unusually well-liked because of your humility and lack of a sense of entitlement. But, you're not, of course, above criticism. And it's been said by 3 senior comrades that you should not have involved comrade Hélène in your underground activities and conflate your personal relationship with her and your separate respective underground responsibilities – she in the Military Section and you in the Political. By drawing her into your attempts to get out of the country to Swaziland you made her vulnerable to her and your arrest. What's your response to that?

I think they are correct in that criticism. But I was in a situation where all contact was broken with me inside and the outside. People had left Mozambique and Swaziland after the Nkomati Accord, and I think it was a mistake in the first place to have contacted her. But then I was absolutely sure she was safe. Nobody would have suspected that she was under surveillance. So, on the basis that she was completely, completely safe, I contacted her. But I think in hindsight, I should've seen that she was actually under surveillance.

When the two of you lived in the same house in Swaziland before she came into the country, didn't you think that maybe both of you were under surveillance? After all, you were head of the PMC (Political-Military Council)?

But I don't think I was under surveillance in Swaziland.

You don't think so?

Definitely not.

Okay...

Actually, when the police saw me with H el ene, they didn't know who this Indian guy with her was. It took them a long time to find out who I was.

It's amazing, you spend so many years in Robben Island, you were banned, you disappeared and were head of the PMC. How many ANC comrades look like you? How could they not tell who you are?

Yes. You know, these special branch people then were actually new people.

Mostly the old Transvaal, not Natal, maybe? So maybe they couldn't immediately identify you?...

Yes.

How did you know they couldn't identify you at first?

No, when they arrested me the police told me 'It took a long time to find out who you are...' But when they got to know, that led to a whole string of disasters, with Mo Shaik and others also getting arrested.

You were not part of *Operation Vula*? You came into country as part of the preparations for the Kabwe Conference? But weren't Moe Shaik and the others already in *Vula*? If so, didn't your contact with them in the country also make *Operation Vula* vulnerable?

No, when I went back to Lusaka, OR (Oliver Tambo) called me in and he wanted to know about how safe it is to go inside. He wanted to know, if you

are sick, for example, what would happen. And so on. Then he told me he wanted to send senior leadership into the country. Then Joe (Slovo) showed me separately on the same basis that they have taken a decision to send in the leadership. They wanted to know what would be the atmosphere. How I got in? Where did I live? What was my accommodation etc, etc. So, at that time they had made a decision to send in the leadership. I was not part of that.

Did you know that Mac (Maharaj) was going to go in?

No, no, he didn't say who was going to go in.

What else emerged in these exchanges?

Nothing. I went back to Swaziland and then I was kidnapped (by the South African Security Police).



**Ebrahim Ismail
Ebrahim,
before his death in
2021,
Media Review
Network**

To come back to this. What were the problems in you getting across the borders? You made two or three attempts?

I think now that because the police were surveilling us, when I wanted to cross, they were there. I didn't know why. You see, the police didn't want to arrest me. They thought they going to surveil me to lead me to others - bigger fish, you see. Once, we know now, the police were surveilling me they then transferred me to those keeping Pravin's (Gordhan) unit under surveillance. Then Pravin kept me underground for some time until Pravin's unit made contact with Swaziland and then he worked out a system to get me out.

So how did you get out? Jumped over a fence or in car?

No, no. Interestingly, when I went out, it was done very professionally. I would move from point A to point B. Then they would phone from a call box to point C. Now the point C chap will be waiting for me at that call box to check an advance group to say that there has been no roadblock. Then they would go to point C to get to point D. I got forward that way, and I got to the border at a place where there was a little opening between South Africa and Swaziland. A comrade met me there on the South African and she took me inside. You could just walk in and out of that gap. There was no need to jump over the fence.

It's amazing that despite the intensity of the struggle at that time, including the escalation of the armed struggle, you could find an easy gap like that to cross the border...Rodney Wilkinson, who carried out the attack on Koeberg, also said he crossed the border into Swaziland with a bicycle at what he said was a silly little rusty, barbed-wire fence that looked like a farm fence not a border fence – though that was in 1982...

Yes. There was an opening and people just walked in and out. It was a little gap.