

City's 'Bloody Friday' recalled - 25 years on

Pretoria News

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Twenty-five years ago on Wednesday (May 21), under the headline "Bloody Friday" the Pretoria News reported on the bombing of the SA Air Force headquarters in Church Street.

On that day, just after 19 people had been killed and 217 were injured in the heart of Pretoria city, there was shock and confusion over what had happened, and why.

Prime Minister of the time, PW Botha, said "no stone will be left unturned to track down and bring to justice those responsible for this despicable, criminal act".

Years later, in a report submitted to the TRC, it was revealed that the attack, planned by Aboobaker Ismail and former SACP leader Joe Slovo, was approved by the then ANC president Oliver Tambo.

Among those who faced the survivors and their relatives during his bid for amnesty, was Ismail, who was commander of MK's special operations unit at the time and responsible for a number of operations, including the Church Street bombing.

According to a report in the Pretoria News in May 1998, Ismail told the TRC amnesty hearing: "People continue to argue that apartheid never existed... we were at war and the security forces were the ones that defended the apartheid state. They were in the frontline and were targeted (by us).

"Did the apartheid forces think they were fighting a war against people that would not fight back?" he asked.

He said he was proud of the bravery, discipline and sacrifices made by MK cadres but regretted the deaths and injury of innocent civilians caught up in the ANC's fight for justice and freedom.

One of the men injured in the Church Street blast, Neville Clarence who was blinded, met Ismail at the amnesty hearings

Three people have applied for amnesty, namely Mr. Aboobaker Ismail, Ms Helena Pastoors and Mr Johannes Molefe.

Mr. Ismail was still the Commissar of Special Operations and the attack occurred under his command. Mr Johannes Molefe was involved in the unit

which planned this attack. Ms. Pastoors was ordered to drive a vehicle containing explosives to a prearranged place in Pretoria, which was to be picked up by other operatives for the attack. It is alleged that this occurred a day before the bombing, on May 19, 1983. The two cadres who carried out the attack were blown up in the blast.

Nineteen other people were killed: Commandant I. J. Henning, Flight Sgt. J.J. Ras, Cpl. A. Nel, Amn. W.L. Kirtley, Lt. M. van Jaarsveld, Col. Stefanus S. Walters, Capt. Riaan Hendrick Liebenburg, Commandant Johan de Villiers, Mr Thomo Jonas Mohlahlo, Mr Lengoi Moses Maimela, Mr Sekgoetsi Jim Magatsela, Mr Mogale Judas Maimela, Ms Sharon Desiree Bos, Ms A Meiring, Mr Joseph Keane Sambo, Mr Pedros Ntemo Khohlwe, Ms Sharon de la Harpe, Mr Stephen John Page and Ms Adriana Meyer.

In addition, 217 people were injured.