

## **PRETORIA May 6 1998 – SAPA ANC MASTERMIND CAMPAIGN JUSTIFIES PRETORIA CHURCH STREET BLAST**

The 1983 Pretoria bomb blast which killed 19 people was an attack on a military target aimed at showing the apartheid regime that their forces could also bleed, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission heard in the capital on Wednesday.

Ten former Umkhonto we Sizwe members were applying for amnesty for a series of bomb attacks they committed as part of an African National Congress campaign to demoralise the apartheid government in the 1980's.

One of the applicants, Aboobaker Ismail, 43, has admitted planning and orchestrating the attacks, including the Pretoria bomb blast, while he was commander of the ANC's Special Operations Unit.

Ismail, 43, recalled in his testimony to the TRC's amnesty committee that according to newspaper reports after the bomb blast there had been a "sea of blue" in the rubble, referring to the blue uniforms of the killed or injured Air Force staff. He said this convinced him that the attack on the SAAF headquarters had been an "overwhelmingly military target".

Ismail who masterminded the Church Street bomb blast said although he regretted the deaths of innocent civilians, the ANC's policy was that they should not be deterred from striking at the apartheid state "for the sake of a few civilian lives".

The Church Street attack on May 20, 1983 killed 19 and injured more than 200 people when a car with 40kg of explosives was detonated outside the SAAF headquarters. Two MK cadres, who were in the car at the time, were also killed because the bomb exploded two minutes early.

Ismail said the bomb was aimed at the military personnel leaving the SA Air Force headquarters. He had personally selected the building as a target. However, he said, the planners of the attack knew that the location of the target inside an urban area posed a threat to civilians.

"We did not target civilians. However the policy of the ANC at the time was that we could not for the sake of saving a few lives be prevented from striking at the power of State, the apartheid state," Ismail said.

He also quoted former ANC president Oliver Tambo as justifying the attacks even though civilians were often killed.

Ismail said the ANC was determined to strike back at the security forces and to make them bleed.

"They could not think they could go on doing anything they wanted because they had the guns. (By way of the Church Street bomb) the enemy forces of the apartheid regime bled," he said.

He added that the security forces had been callous in their treatment of black people in South Africa.

Ismail was being cross-examined by Louis Visser, SC, who is appearing for some of victims of the bombing campaign.

Visser, who has appeared at other TRC hearings on behalf of policemen applying for amnesty for human rights abuses, found himself arguing in favour of victims in this hearing.

The victims he is representing were opposing the application for amnesty on the grounds that they believe the attack on them was not justified.

Visser questioned the ANC's political motive in carrying out the bomb attack on the Nedbank building which housed the administrative headquarters of the SAAF and other offices and was therefore a soft target.

Ismail replied that the struggle between the ANC and the apartheid state could not be equated with a war between two countries.

"There would have been no struggle if there had been no apartheid state. It was the cause of suffering and bitterness in this country and the oppression of the people," he said.

Visser said the people he represented found it difficult to accept that as administrative people such as telephonists and typists they were seen as a military target.

Ismail replied that even though they were administrative people they contributed to the operation of the military machine and had to be seen as part of the whole structure and not as individuals.

The actions of the special operations unit had the support and approval of SACP head Joe Slovo and Tambo.

Quoting from a speech made by Tambo at a funeral for ANC members killed in a SADF cross-border raid into Mozambique in 1983, he said it was time to bring the struggle to the white areas of South Africa, which had until then been free of the strife occurring in black areas.

Ismail explained that this was not seen as an order to attack whites "willy nilly" but to take the conflict into white areas so that they could experience the harsh realities of what was happening in the country.

"We wanted whites to come out of their comfort zones and feel the pain and suffering of the black people. We wanted to bring them to their senses," he said.

Ismail completed his testimony on Wednesday. The hearing of the nine other applications for amnesty continues on Thursday.