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TAMBO ORDERED CHURCH STREET BLAST: ANC

Former African National Congress president Oliver Tambo ordered the 1983 bombing of the SA Air Force Headquarters in Church Street, Pretoria, to avenge a cross-border raid into Lesotho by South African security forces.

Tambo is identified as the person who gave final approval for the operation, in the ANC's second submission to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission on Monday.

It said Tambo asked the ANC's national executive committee for a mandate in 1979 to form a special unit to attack key strategic targets - "spectacular operations that would hit the economy hard, and inspire the oppressed majority".

The first special operations command consisted of former Housing Minister Joe Slovo, Montso Mokgabudi and Aboobaker Ismail, who has also been linked to the June 1986 Magoos bar bomb-blast.

The submission said the Church Street bomb-blast followed a cross-border raid into Lesotho in which 42 ANC supporters and Basotho were killed, and the assassination of Slovo's wife, Ruth First, in Maputo, Angola.

"With the increasingly indiscriminate attacks on neighbouring states and the viciousness of attacks on SA civilians by the security forces, it was decided by special operations command to attack military personnel.

"This resulted in operations such as the car bomb at South African Air Force HQ in Pretoria."

At the time of the bombing in 1983 special operations command no longer reported directly to Tambo.

Ismail had been appointed overalL commander of the unit and reported directly to Slovo, then chief of staff, at military headquarters.

"The objective was to carry out a highly visible attack which was impossible to cover up, against military personnel in uniform," the submission said.

It was decided, therefore, to target military personnel who waited for buses outside SAAF HQ at 4.30pm each day.

In the early stages of planning the operation discussions had been held on the possible loss of civilian life, and whether this would be justified.

"After careful consideration it was decided by OR (Oliver) Tambo, in terms of the mandate he had given by the NEC, that special operations should proceed with the operation, taking great care that the target was unmistakably military.

On the afternoon of May 20 1983, the unit had driven into Pretoria and parked the car packed with explosives in Church Street, at the entrance to air force headquarters.

When the bomb exploded a few minutes earlier than planned, 19 people were killed, including both Umkhonto we Sizwe cadres and 11 air force personnel.

"According to initial media reports, more than 200 military personnel and few civilians were injured, but these figures were later distorted by the government in an attempt to portray this attack as aimed at civilians."

The attack on the headquarters had not contradicted ANC policy to avoid civilian casualties.

Instead, it illustrated the problems which had arisen as a result of strategic installations being placed in high-density civilian areas, the submission said.