

COMMITTEE ADJOURNS

TRUTH AND RECONCILIATION COMMISSION

AMNESTY HEARING

DATE: 8TH MAY 1998

NAME: SIPHO MATTHEWS THOBELA

DAY: 5

---

ON RESUMPTION

CHAIRPERSON: Mr van den Berg?

MR VAN DEN BERG: Thank you Mr Chairperson. You need to guide me just in terms of your time constraints, I see that it's already midday. Is the intention that we complete as close to 1 o'clock as possible?

CHAIRPERSON: Yes, some people have to be travelling and have to leave for the airport shortly after 1 o'clock.

MR VAN DEN BERG: Thank you Mr Chairman, I don't imagine that this will take terribly long. Mr Chairperson, one of the matter which this Committee had indicated that it wants to hear evidence on is the attacks on Sasol 1 and 2.

A person by the name of Siphon Matthews Thobela was involved in those attacks. He's not an applicant before this Committee however he has lodged an application for amnesty. It's the only incident for which he applies for amnesty and accordingly we believe that it would be best if it's disposed of at this time and so I'm bringing an application to join his amnesty application with the other applications already before this Committee .

CHAIRPERSON: Yes, the other application, was that lodged prior to the cut-off date which was the finally extended cut-off date, I think it was September 1997?

MR VAN DEN BERG: That is correct Mr Chairman.

CHAIRPERSON: So it's properly before the Commission?

MR VAN DEN BERG: Yes, it was lodged together with all of the other applications, lodged on behalf of the ANC and MK and was in fact lodged together with Mr Ismail's application.

CHAIRPERSON: Mr Steenkamp, is there any reason why it wasn't initially included with the other applicants in this hearing because it would seem that this is the hearing for it to be dealt with?

MR STEENKAMP: Sure Mr Chairman, I think that the position is that, if I'm not mistaken the contents of the application of Mr Thobela was not I think regarded at that stage as hearable matter but surely it must be dealt with now.

CHAIRPERSON: So if it's - the only application is in respect of the Sasolburg attack then the due notification to victims, if any the interested parties, implicated person etc., has been complied with in respect of the other applicants who have applied so there would be no objection from that point or no difficulty from that point in joining the ...[indistinct]

MR STEENKAMP: Absolutely Mr Chairman.

CHAIRPERSON: Mr van der Berg, I think the practical and wise thing to do would be to join Mr Thobela as an applicant in these hearings. Are there any objections from any of the other applicants in this regard, to that occurring?

MR MODISE: Certainly not from the applicants that I have consulted with Mr Chairperson.

CHAIRPERSON: Mr Visser?

MR VISSER: Mr Chairman, I'm just listening to my attorney, we're not involved in this type of thing so I don't think I've got anything to say, thank you Mr Chairman.

CHAIRPERSON: Yes, if his application is properly before the Commission and has been filed in timeously and it seems that the only reason why it's not before us at the moment is because it was separated from the others because it was considered to be an unhearable as opposed to a hearable.

Then the obvious route to follow to join him and he is so joined but I must say Mr van den Berg, it will just be subject to us getting the application form. I think we must have the application form in front of us because there are other applicants involved in the same incidents notification to victims, interested and implicated persons has been complied with so Mr Thobela's application will then be considered at this hearing.

MR VAN DEN BERG: Mr Chairman, I have copies of the application form, together with a statement which is being prepared by ourselves and I'd like to hand those up before he takes the oath.

CHAIRPERSON: Thank you Mr van den Berg. Mr van den Berg, I take it that there is a proper application form before the Committee because this one I see is unsigned.

MR VAN DEN BERG: I will take the applicant through the reason for it being unsigned. A signed copy - his evidence will be that a signed copy is before the Committee.

CHAIRPERSON: Yes. And this is a true copy of the signed copy?

DR BURTON: ...[indistinct]

CHAIRPERSON: This then will be - the application form will be received as Exhibit F and the statement by Mr Thobela will be received as Exhibit G. Yes Mr van den Berg?

MR VAN DEN BERG: The applicant will testify in English Mr Chairman.

CHAIRPERSON: That's your choice Mr Thobela.

MR VAN DEN BERG: His other choice is to testify in German which I think might be a little difficult.

CHAIRPERSON: Yes, it might. Yes, Mr van den Berg, do you want to - sorry.

Mr Thobela, do you have any objection to taking the oath?

SIPHO MATTHEWS THOBELA: (sworn states)

CHAIRPERSON: Is it correct Mr Thobela, that your full names are Sipho: S-I-P-H-O, Matthews: M-A-T-T-H-E-W-S, Thobela: T-H-O-B-E-L-A?

MR THOBELA: Yes.

CHAIRPERSON: Mr van den Berg?

EXAMINATION BY MR VAN DEN BERG: Thank you Mr Chairman.

Mr Thobela, you have before you which is now Exhibit F, a copy of your application form, could you have a look at that? Would you turn to page 6 of the application form? You will note that it is unsigned, can you give an explanation for that/

MR THOBELA: Yes, it's unsigned because initially I signed an application form with certain people who mentioned my name in these operations.

CHAIRPERSON: Sorry Mr Thobela, I don't want to interrupt but you pushed to button on your microphone? It just makes me nervous when these lights don't come on, I'm not sure whether it's working or not.

MR VAN DEN BERG: Could you repeat the answer to that question?

MR THOBELA: Yes. Initially when we applied for amnesty we signed an application form with Paula McBride and they were all handed to the ANC head office.

MR VAN DEN BERG: You've had a look at Annexure F?

JUDGE PILLAY: You're talking about a copy or this would be a copy of the original one you signed, Exhibit F?

MR THOBELA: Yes, that would be it certainly.

ADV MOTATA: Mr Thobela, just before Mr van den Berg commences, did you receive any acknowledgement from the Truth and Reconciliation Committee, that is the Amnesty Committee wing, that your application was duly received?

MR THOBELA: Yes, I received a letter that was like a feedback that said to me I'll be called for hearing by the Amnesty Committee.

MR MOTATA: I see.

MR VAN DEN BERG: Do you have a copy of that letter?

MR THOBELA: Yes, but presently I don't have it.

MR VAN DEN BERG: Could you get that to me so that I can make that available to the Committee?

MR THOBELA: Yes.

MR VAN DEN BERG: You've had a look at Annexure F, do you confirm that that is your application for amnesty?

MR THOBELA: Yes.

MR VAN DEN BERG: You've also prepared a statement which is Annexure G before you. I'd like you to take the Committee through this statement, adding where you need to add. I may interrupt you from time to time as may members of the Committee.

MR THOBELA: Yes.

MR VAN DEN BERG: Thank you Mr Thobela.

MR THOBELA:

"I was born on the 24th of May 1956 in Chatterston township near Nigel. The township was later removed to Duduza. I schooled in Nigel, starting my high school there. However I later moved to a boarding school in Nelspruit where I attended school until 1976. At the time 1976, June 16 uprising my fellow students started questioning the authorities on the deaths of our fellow students in Soweto and other townships. We began organising in our school around the issue of Afrikaans. However maths and science subjects in our school were done in Afrikaans and we found it difficult to receive education in Afrikaans.

We distributed placards and pamphlets and that led to the presence of police on the school. The students proposed that the school be closed for a period of mourning"

MR VAN DEN BERG: Can I interrupt you there?

MR THOBELA: Yes.

MR VAN DEN BERG: When you say the students proposed, were you a party to that proposal?

MR THOBELA: Yes, I was part of the SRC in the school.

MR VAN DEN BERG: Please continue.

MR THOBELA:

"As a result of these proposals I and a number of students were arrested and I was detained for approximately two months during the period which I was intensively interrogated and tortured. I was asked questions about my involvement in Sasol, my attitude towards the ANC and Frelemo.

At one stage the torture was so extreme that I pretended to be ill. I was taken to a doctor who advised the authorities that there was nothing wrong with me"

DR TSOTSI: Mr Thobela, just before you proceed I would request you to take it slowly because we've got the interpreters and they are indicating that they have problems in keeping pace with you.

MR THOBELA:

"Towards the end of my periods of detention I was charged with sabotage. When the case was postponed I was released into the custody of the principal of my school. I went home in Nigel. In Nigel I realised that there was a total war between students and the police. We as students had no means of defending ourselves. I was also afraid of further detention.

And the prospect of being jailed, arising from sabotage charges which charges were devoid of substance, I arranged with a number of other friends to leave the country. I left South Africa in early '77 travelling to Swaziland. There I joined the ANC for a period. I worked locally for the ANC in Swaziland.

In March 1977, I went to Angola via Mozambique. I received initial training at Nova Kateng Camp. This camp was later bombed by the SADF. In April 1978 I went for specialised reconnaissance training in USSR. I returned to Angola and received further training at Fazenda.

I was called to Funda Camp to join a special unit which was being trained by Rashid. After a period of training we were re-deployed in Maputo. In Maputo I was instructed by comrade Joe Slovo to conduct reconnaissance at Sasol 2 plant in Secunda. I was to conduct reconnaissance with comrade Mutudi, another member of special operations.

I was appointed to do reconnaissance because I knew the area reasonably well, having lived in the East Rand and travelled mostly to Nelspruit"

MR VAN DEN BERG: Can I interrupt you there Mr Thobela? We know from the evidence that has been presented to this Committee, that reconnaissance was also done at Mobil and at Sasol 1, did you know about that at the time?

MR THOBELA: You see we used to operate on the basis of, you give information to those who require it. We used not to know the other sub-unit, what was it doing. That was not our way of working, that we know everything about special operations.

MR VAN DEN BERG: Would you continue at paragraph 8?

MR THOBELA:

"We conducted the reconnaissance for approximately two weeks, pretending to be persons seeking employment at Sasol 2. We stayed in the hostel area and the area around, occasions at the police station nearby"

MR VAN DEN BERG: Could you explain how that happened?

MR THOBELA: You see in Sekunda, because Sasol it's a national keypoint, so always there was a presence of police, always this nearby police station near the hostel. So whenever you come, being a stranger in a hostel, you report to a police.

You take out your ID book, the police notes you down, already notes. Early in the morning we are going for work while we are doing reconnaissance, that's what was happening. Those police were very kind for us.

MR VAN DEN BERG: Would you continue.

MR THOBELA: Alright.

"By so doing we were able to speak to a number of people which enables us to supplement what we were able to observe. On our return to Maputo we reported to comrade Joe Slovo and Rashid. They instructed us to start planning an attack on Sasol 2.

I was the commander of the unit which comprised of Victor Kayane, David Mohele whom we call Lords and Mutudi"

CHAIRPERSON: Sorry, is that Lords: L-O-R-D-S or L-O-T-S?

MR THOBELA: We used to call him Lords: L-O-R-D-S.

CHAIRPERSON: Alright.

MR THOBELA: Why? He was a Lord because he was very brave.

"After a period of planning, which planning was overseen and vetted by comrade Joe Slovo and Rashid, we were instructed to infiltrate the country. Material had already been made available to us through a DLB. We arrived in the country on Friday" ...[intervention]

CHAIRPERSON: Sorry Mr Thobela, if I can just remind you to keep your pace a little bit slower for the interpreters.

MR THOBELA: Sorry.

"We arrived in the country on Friday after a mishap of involving a motor car which overturned, planned to execute the mission of Saturday. The was on the Republic Day, 31st of May 1980. The attack was planned to coincide with the Republic Day.

After a final reconnaissance we commenced the operation approximately as 21H00. We cut through the fence" ...[intervention]

MR VAN DEN BERG: Mr Thobela, would you add to what you've set out in paragraph, just give a little bit more detail about the operation?

MR THOBELA: Alright. As we were staying in a hostel at the time, now and then early in the morning we used to look at the shifts so that we avoid loss of life of civilians, workers, even some of the engineers. So we had to take time because even at 9 o'clock on Friday we had to go to the target and observe how many people were there especially when we knew exactly where we were going to plant the limpet mines.

We couldn't just plant a limpet mine where we could see that it could affect our own people on top of it, our own fathers, our own brothers who are working there.

So that is what we were busy during that Friday night, morning. I think I've answered your question Sir.

MR VAN DEN BERG: Yes, thank you Mr Thobela, would you continue with the statement? We were at paragraph 10.

MR THOBELA:

"After final reconnaissance we commenced the operation. At approximately 21H00 we cut through the fence, placed the limpet mines in the appropriate place then withdrew"

...[intervention]

CHAIRPERSON: Approximately how many limpet mines did you place Mr Thobela? When I say: "you" I mean you plural.

MR THOBELA: Each and everyone had at least two mines.

CHAIRPERSON: So you planted up to eight mines?

MR THOBELA: Yes.

MR VAN DEN BERG: In other words eight mines were placed?

MR THOBELA: Not exactly eight because there was also a mistake somewhere where a mine was lost just on the nearby ravine there, while we were crawling.

MR VAN DEN BERG: Would you continue?

MR THOBELA:

"We were not detected and we did not encounter anybody in the process. We immediately returned to Swaziland where we met comrade Obadi and comrade Rashid, then they directed us to Maputo on the very same night.

In the operation no person was killed because that we could have heard during our way to Maputo, we were listening to radios now and then"

CHAIRPERSON: What did you hear through the media relating to the result of your operation?

MR THOBELA: It was the - actually we were overwhelmed to put it straight, because we were also exited to do such a big operation to undermine and prejudice the apartheid system. We heard that fire was raging in Sasol and they announced both Sasols although then I didn't know, my fellow comrades they were also part of this coordination of attack. We were highly, you know, motivated and highly encouraged to fight more.

MR VAN DEN BERG: Were there any injuries in the incident?

MR THOBELA: Not as far as we know except that later we heard that somebody was injured. We don't know how was he injured because that was not in my set of the operation.

MR VAN DEN BERG: Would you continue at paragraph 12?

MR THOBELA:

"On the 30th January 1981 I was also involved in an incident known as "Matola Raid". This occurred in a residential area in Maputo in a house which I and a number of MK cadres resided, was attacked by what we believed, mercenaries, it was not SADF per se because those people, we know SADF, the style of attack, we know everything about them. Those were pure mercenaries"

To site an example in this, why we say those were mercenaries, first they painted their faces with black polish because they were White, they couldn't infiltrate a black township being white.

Secondly their helmets were written Nazi schwartztechers. I can even quote some of the schwartztechers were written: "Kak and kak and kak, take me to hell". Those are tendencies of

mercenaries.

"And then in a house in which MK cadres were resided was attacked by believed mercenaries. Whilst I was preparing to go and sleep I heard a sound of gunfire whereby all the comrades were lined up like in a firing squad"

If you have ever seen somewhere in Nigeria how they fire people on a line, closed eyes, shooting, barbarous killing, that's what they were there to do.

"So they started shooting. When they started shooting I peeped through the window, I could see a gang of mercenaries approaching and shooting at our comrades. I had to retaliate to defend the comrades. Later when I escaped in that house, I escaped through the roof, parachuted on a tree. I realised there was a body lying but later when I was in hospital I was discovered that it was Mike Hutchinson(?) that was from the press, and when the family from London was coming to collect him, the corpse in Mozambique. Now this shows again that the main attack was mercenaries"

And I hope that those people have also applied for amnesty in this country.

MR VAN DEN BERG: Mr Thobela, did you sustain any injuries in the attack?

MR THOBELA: I was shot with four bullets and then I went for intensive care for a period of three months in Mozambique. And then, later when I asked some friends who were coming to visit, I asked how many people died and they said five comrades died in our residence and the other residences also some people died.

But what was funny with that is that their ears were cut with the bayonet. After shooting a comrade they cut the ear. We showed that - the mercenaries had to go and put the ear on top of the table and then get paid their fat cheques.

MR VAN DEN BERG: Once you were discharged from the hospital in Maputo, what happened to you then?

MR THOBELA: When I was discharged from Maputo military hospital the President suggested that due to my ill health I could no longer proceed with operations and I should then be taken to school to get some skills in some way although my career was petroleum engineering at the time but my health was not up to standard, then I was sent to East Germany to study welding technology.

MR VAN DEN BERG: Would you resume at your statement at paragraph 17?

MR THOBELA:

"My injuries were of such a nature that I could no longer act as an operative, accordingly fulfilled various administrative roles in the ANC. I was not operationally deployed after this time. As a result of my involvement in the ANC and MK my family which remained behind in Duduza were harassed. My two sisters were killed in a bomb that was thrown into our home. My father was detained together with a number of prominent activists, example Popo Molefe and Terror Lekota. He was initially part of Delmas Prison Trial but due to illness he was unable to stand the trial. He died mysteriously, under mysterious circumstances in Germiston hospital"

MR VAN DEN BERG: Thank you Mr Thobela. Can I refer you back to your application for amnesty, that's Annexure F, sorry Exhibit F. Could you just briefly explain to the Committee your political motivation for joining MK and for being involved in the operation which you've just described?

MR THOBELA: To explain more detailed, during my torture in Nelspruit the South African special branches especially taught me hatred, they taught me how to do some of the things. Was it not the ANC with provided us with political

education maybe things would have gone out of hand, so we were still keeping in principle with the ANC and we can't defy our leaders on what we were advised on.

MR VAN DEN BERG: Can I refer you to paragraph 10(a) and 10(b) of Exhibit F, that's page 3. Would you have a look at those?

MR THOBELA: Yes.

MR VAN DEN BERG: Do you confirm that that is the basis on which you seek amnesty today?

MR THOBELA: That is correct Sir.

MR VAN DEN BERG: Thank you Mr Chairman, I have no further questions.

NO FURTHER QUESTIONS BY MR VAN DEN BERG

CHAIRPERSON: Thank you Mr van den Berg.

Mr Knight, do you have any questions to put to the witness?

MR KNIGHT: Mr Chairman, I do not.

CHAIRPERSON: Mr Visser?

MR VISSER: Mr Chairman, insofar as it may be relevant to, in fact so far as it is relevant to the evidence of Mr Ismail, Mr Aboobaker Ismail, would you allow me just to ask the witness on one aspect?

CHAIRPERSON: Certainly.

CROSS-EXAMINATION BY MR VISSER: You explained that you had to make certain that your brothers who worked at Sasol would not be affected or injured, killed, why do you specifically confine it to your brothers?

MR THOBELA: Yes, because the majority of the workers in Sasol is blacks, that is why I had to confine that.

MR VISSER: Yes, you weren't concerned with the whites?

MR THOBELA: I was also concerned because there are also good whites but there are also those hard who don't want to change Sir.

MR VISSER: So how do you distinguish between those different kinds of whites when you go and place a bomb?

MR THOBELA: You see what, engineers, those are the people who are developing the country but to think I can compare police, a white police at that time and an engineer, I couldn't. A police was ruthless as far as I'm concerned Sir.

MR VISSER: Yes, you see Mr Ismail, Aboobaker Ismail on a question, I believe it was from Mr Motata, gave the same answer. He said he considered whether there might be danger to the residents of a black - I've forgotten the name, Zandela.

MR VAN DEN BERG: With respect Mr Chairman, Zandela relates to the Sasol 1 attack, we're dealing with the Sasol 2 attack.

CHAIRPERSON: Yes.

MR VISSER: That's not the point Mr Chairman, I'm saying that he gave similar evidence.

And what I want to put to you - perhaps I should add this as well, we have a note here that - and I'm just going to refer to him as Rashid, that Rashid said that you were a person who killed Nazi soldiers, I think the note reads. Would that be a fair description of you? He said: "He killed Nazi soldiers", do you have any comment on that?

MR THOBELA: No, I ...[intervention]

MR VAN DEN BERG: Mr Chairman, with respect, that related specifically to the Metola incident and it was prefaced by reference to the Metola incident.

CHAIRPERSON: Yes, and then it was explained why the word Nazi was used, because some of the invaders had schwartztechers emblems on them.

MR VISSER: And the very next question following from that is: "Are you actually saying that the Metola raid was carried out, not by the South African Defence Force but by mercenaries, is that your evidence"?

MR THOBELA: Yes, Sir.

MR VISSER: I see.