

Mamelodi massacre

Glenda Webster

An incident which took place in Mamelodi outside Pretoria on November 21, 1985 is a tragic example of the attitude of the South African Police force to their black compatriots — irrespective of whether these latter are bellicose black youth or peaceful parents using passive means to make their grievances known. Some police, if not most, it seems, actively seek confrontation and the opportunity to shoot. They do not try by all ways and means to avoid incidents that cause injury and death.

In the incident in Mamelodi, thousands of women had arranged a march to present a list of grievances to their mayor Mr Ndlazi, including, prophetically, one about the removal of white police and the army from the township. The march which proceeded in compliance with police requests ended in chaos and disaster with 13 people, including a baby, dead and many more injured.

Mr Peter Soal of the Progressive Federal Party investigated the events which led up to the massacre at Mamelodi. His party collected affidavits from township residents who were present or involved in the march. Four of these affidavits are reproduced below to provide a description of the incident.

On the basis of his findings and because of the current situation of unrest, Mr Soal called for a permanent judicial enquiry to investigate all 'allegations concerning the police'. Mr Soal's call, subsequently repeated in Parliament, remains unanswered. An accusation that his statements about the Mamelodi massacre were 'untrue, unfair and malicious' are currently the subject of litigation between himself and Mr Louis le Grange, the Minister of Law and Order.

However, after considering Mr Soal's report and its affidavits, I cannot help coming to the conclusion that the police did not try to avoid an incident, and the assessment of one township resident (see affidavits) is quite correct: 'the manner in which the police conducted themselves . . . was . . . violence provoking'. Furthermore their behaviour was very likely to cause injury or death.

Choice of weapons is the first factor which leads me to this conclusion about police behaviour.

The question of what weapons police use to disperse a crowd had already been thrown under the spotlight because of the massacre at Uitenhage that took place exactly eight months before on March 21. In that incident 20 people were killed as a result of gun shot inflicted by police fire. It led to a Commission of Inquiry chaired by Justice Donald Kannemeyer. Its findings and recommendations were published in June 1985.

In his report Mr Soal highlighted some points made in the Kannemeyer report that are applicable to the Mamelodi situation. For instance, . . . the Internal Security Act no 74 of 1982 provides that 'firearms or other weapons likely to cause bodily injury or death shall not . . . be used to disperse a gathering until weapons less likely to cause such injury or death have been used . . .'

What exactly took place before the police started firing into the crowd at Mamelodi is not certain. It appears teargas fired by the police caused the crowd to flee in panic (they had not expected police conduct of this sort). As they were running they were shot with 'weapons likely to cause injury or death'. How much warning they had, if any at all, before the teargas was fired is also not clear.

Furthermore, with regard to the weapons used, Mr Soal points out that since the march was openly planned on the Tuesday and publically arranged on the Wednesday, it is highly likely the police knew about it. They had time before the Thursday of the march to be 'properly equipped' as recommended by the Kannemeyer commission with 'machinery' that would not cause death or injury should it be necessary to disperse a crowd.

- This leads then to the second point, the question of whether the crowd was 'riotous' and whether 'certain exceptions' prevailed which justified the use of 'weapons likely to cause . . . death'.

Assuming the affidavits to be accurate, then crowd behaviour was orderly and acquiescent with police demands wherever possible. Its intention was entirely peaceful — the marchers sat down to negotiate with the police to get permission to proceed with their march when asked to do so. They handed over their placards and banners which stated their peaceful intentions. They allowed a police vehicle to lead their march in spite of the fact that they were requesting the removal of police from the township. They avoided incidents of violence, and prohibited children from joining the march.

Police behaviour on the other hand, was contradictory. Once again, assuming the affidavits to be accurate . . .

- the marchers were told they were allowed to sing. Then in the end, according to some affidavits, they were told that if they did not stop singing they would be shot.

- In the beginning the police led the marchers, in the end the marchers were surrounded by army trucks on the ground while a helicopter hovered overhead.

- The police had assured the marchers that if there were no incidents of stone-throwing etc, and if banners were not used, there would be no police retaliation. People assumed that if they kept their side of the bargain, the police would keep theirs. Marchers were therefore shocked when the police started firing.

Other information in Mr Soal's reports reinforces the conclusion about deliberate police provocation.

Mr Ndlazi, the mayor, mentioned at a Press conference the next day that he had abandoned attempts to address the crowd on November 21 because the loud-hailer the police offered him was defective and he could not be heard beyond the first few rows of the crowd.

In the end one is left with one's suspicions. If the police are innocent, then why not appoint a judicial commission to prove it?

Affidavit

I, E M, an adult male resident of Mamelodi East do hereby make oath and state that:

- 1 On Tuesday November 19, 1985 there was a meeting of residents and a resolution was made by the over 4 000 residents of Mamelodi who attended the meeting — to declare Thursday as the marching day to the administration building to present their grievances. The first grievance was to demand the withdrawal of the white members of the S A Police from the township, as well as the Defence Force. The second was for the lifting of the restrictions concerning funerals. The third concerned house rentals, because of confusion over amounts to be paid — specifically with the 99 year lease. A delegation was elected to speak as well as to present the written grievances to the town council, specifically the mayor. The delegation consisted of 10 people, led by Mr Louis Khumalo, president of the Mamelodi Parents Association.
- 2 On Thursday November 21 1985, I went to the meeting point at 7 am at the YMCA. Already there were 5 000 to 8 000 people gathered there. I looked for Mr Khumalo, who was nowhere around, and then went to his home. I was told he'd gone to his work at the pharmacy. It was closed. I drove around looking for him for 15 minutes. The situation was calm but tense, with no incidents. I drove back to Mamelodi East. It was near 8 am. At the bridge crossing the Apies river about eight to 10 Casspirs and a number of light police vehicles had blocked the marchers from crossing the bridge into Mamelodi West. I parked my car in a yard and joined the marchers. The people were sitting, being addressed by a police officer. The crowd was I estimate 40 000 to 50 000, since they covered the area from the bridge to the YMCA. I went next to the officer and what he said was: that the marchers could march because he recognised their legitimate grievances, but on his conditions, namely — there should be no banners or placards; the marchers would be led by the Casspir; and no overrunning the Casspir would be allowed; and any violence would result in shooting; and the people could sing as they marched. Then the march started. At one stage the crowd was stopped in order to confiscate banners. One banner said 'Let us speak without shooting', and another 'Respect our elders — they are not fighting.' The rest of the march proceeded without any incident.
- 3 At the administration block there was already a crowd hemmed around by Casspirs. Most of the people were sitting and most of them in front were adult or elderly — since the parents had asked the youths to stand back. There was a man in a red shirt standing on the Casspir addressing the people — he was apparently an interpreter, previously used by the police at the bridge. I crossed over to in front of the hippo and sat down by the robot pole. I saw a woman helped on to the hippo and she tried to address the people with the police megaphone, but it seemed to be malfunctioning.

At that point a yellow Sierra car came from the entrance road and made a U-turn in front of the casspir. A high-ranking officer got out and spoke to the officer on the Casspir for a minute or two. Then he went back into the car. At that point a police helicopter was hovering above the crowd. No-one else tried to address the crowd and they were still just sitting expecting to be addressed. About a minute or two after the car had left, without any warning — and I could have heard one, as I was sitting about six metres from the Casspir — the shooting suddenly started. I ran away around the south of the admin block, and saw the interpreter with the loudhailer also running. I ran towards Denneboom station. The Casspirs were following the crowd, still shooting teargas and other ammunition. An elderly man was bleeding on his right leg and could no longer run and was helped into a kombi with other elderly people. As I went to the East, police and soldiers were still chasing people everywhere. There seemed to be no violence from the people. About seven kilometres away they were still chasing people, now only apparently shooting teargas. Near my home, my wife and kids were standing inside a yard at a corner. A police car raced past and threw a teargas at them. I saw a car parked near the mortuary with two bullet holes through it, and I learned that it had happened that morning. I saw or heard of no petrol-bombing or stoning of policemen or councillor's houses on that day, and I am not aware of any such actions from that day till this. I also believe that the number of deaths officially reported as a result of the shooting that day, is not yet correct, because there are still a number of people missing that cannot be traced.



Justice Donald Kannemeyer, left. Were his recommendations flouted in Mamelodi?

photo: Colin Urquhart, Eastern Province Herald

Affidavit

I, M M, aged 36 years, a resident in Mamelodi East, do swear under oath and say that:

- 1 I was present on November 21, 1985 when the residents of Mamelodi marched to present their grievances to the Mayor Mr B Ndlazi, at the Administration Offices of Mamelodi.
- 2 At the bridge that connects Mamelodi East and West, next to Tsako Thabo Secondary School, the Mamelodi East women (mothers and elderly women) converged as police in hippos blocked the road.
- 3 Residents, through spokesmen, negotiated with the police to allow the march. This was permitted on condition that marchers carried no placards or stones. The residents complied and handed over the placards bearing messages 'DO NOT SHOOT', 'WE ARE FOR PEACE'. These were loaded onto the hippo.
- 4 The move by the police to allow the march and to lead the residents, was positively received by the residents. The latter tried by all means to ensure that children did not join the march as the matter was now in the hands of their parents. The marchers were well behaved and there was no incident.
- 5 Residents from all sections of Mamelodi joined the march: mothers, fathers, young adults and the elderly. It ceased to be a march by women when everyone joined. The marchers repeatedly sent children away.
- 6 Next to the stadium the marchers stopped. Talks on whether to utilise the stadium, taking into account the turnout, followed. The decision to proceed to the office was adopted. The march proceeded to the administrative offices.
- 7 At the open space adjacent the offices, thousands of Mamelodi residents waited to present their grievances and to be addressed by Mr Ndlazi. At this point hippos had surrounded the march and some parked on the road towards the offices amid the residents. The meeting was peaceful without an incident. We were so close to the hippos that we could read the name tag of policeman 'VAN DEN BERGH'.
- 8 The spokeslady climbed on the hippo to read out the grievances, and then stepped down.
- 9 Mr Ndlazi surfaced from the hippo and tried to address the residents. At this point the helicopter that was circling the marchers zoomed past as Mr Ndlazi spoke and the residents shouted for him to speak louder as they could not hear.
- 10 Mr Ndlazi instead of proceeding with his talk, went inside the hippo and the helicopter hurled a teargas canister. All hippos started firing teargas to the marchers and people choked, fell to the ground, tramping on each other as police repeatedly fired at residents who ran in all directions for cover.
- 11 Elderly people choked and fell and the able-bodied tried to assist, but police teargassed us as we were trying to assist.

- 12 At this point the residents were uncontrollable, the situation was chaotic and the people ran in all directions. Teargas and gunshots were being fired by the police.
- 13 The assessment in Appendix 1, highlights my reading of the events on that day.

APPENDIX 1

- 1 The already tarnished image of the police, and the frail police community relations, have been dealt a heavy blow by police action and handling of the residents' march on November 21, 1985.
- 2 The manner in which police conducted themselves when residents peacefully sought to register their grievances with the Mayor Mr B Ndlazi was most deplorable, brutal and violence provoking. The actions engendered community anger and bitterness that will live in the minds of the residents for many years to come.
- 3 Loss of life could have been avoided if the police did not open fire or teargas the residents.
- 4 The police should have escorted the masses in the same manner they did earlier on, because that way they managed to lead the residents peacefully until the procession reached the meeting place.
- 5 The pamphlets that police distributed in the community later, not only displayed the insensitivity of the police towards a grieving and hurt community, but also showed lack of community caring.

Affidavit

I, F K of Mamelodi, being duly sworn, make oath and say as follows:

- 1 I am a permanent resident living at the above address in Mamelodi.
- 2 I am a married woman aged 46.
- 3 On Thursday, November 21, 1985 at about 11h00, I went to the meeting about the high house rent. While we were there, the helicopter threw down teargas. The police started to shoot. I ran away. I saw a black policeman shooting down a boy. I took the arm of an old man to help him. A Casspir passed us. The police inside shouted to me: *Van-dag gaan ons die kaffers doodskiet. Julle sal van-dag kak!* I just ran off to my home.

Affidavit

I, C S, do hereby make oath and state that, I attended the meeting on Tuesday November 19, at the YMCA in Mamelodi at which we all agreed to ask the mayor to talk to the police to request that the white police withdraw from Mamelodi and that the restrictions on funerals be removed. The meeting was attended mainly by women, thousands in number. The meeting also resolved to hold a work stay-away and peaceful march on Thursday 21, (a banner was prepared

stating our peaceful intention.)

On Thursday morning we gathered and marched together with the police in attendance from East Mamelodi to the administration offices. There were no incidents of violence. At the offices we gathered outside and the police were there, in many armoured vehicles. The police asked us to stop singing. The people in front stopped, but those far away couldn't hear. We never saw the mayor. Then through a black interpreter, using a loudhailer, we were ordered 'If you don't keep quiet in three seconds, we are going to start shooting.' At this stage most of the crowd in

front were women and there was no stone throwing or violence from the crowd.

Then teargas was dropped from the helicopter overhead, at the back of the crowd, and people started running. I was trampled by the crowd and knocked unconscious. When I came round there was a dead woman lying next to me, bleeding from the nose. I could still hear shooting in the distance. When I left I saw another body of a young boy, a teenager, lying in the street between Denneboom Station and the offices. He had blood on the back of his neck and lower back. I saw the police collect the boy's body.

Sash member KATHY JAGOE, is also editor of the bulletin published by DPSA, Disabled People of South Africa. The group is a national organisation of people of different disabilities and cultures who have come together to work towards changing issues which affect them. This article highlights some disturbing figures.

Briefing on violence

DPSA is very aware that violence is one of the major causes of disability in this country. Violence can result not only in the initial impairment, but often if the injured person does not receive the correct medical treatment, preferably immediately, an injury which could very easily result in a life-long disability.

At this point there are no available figures on those disabled in the violence of the last two years. There are not even adequate figures of those injured. However, there *are* figures of those who have died.

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| January 1984 — end 1984 | 175 people died |
| September 1984 (Vaal uprising) — end 1984 | 149 people died |
| January 1985 — December 4 1985 | 791 people died |
| Since State of Emergency (July 21 — December 4 1985) | 457 people died |
| First month of media blanket (Nov 2 — Dec 4 1985) | 99 people died |
| August 1985 | 163 people died |
| Killed by security forces (Jan 1 — Oct 31 1985) | 360 people died |
| Daily death rate since State of Emergency | 3.44 people died |
| Daily death rate before State of Emergency | 1.67 people died |

September 1984 — December 4 1985

TOTAL 940 people died

(Figures issued by SA Institute of Race Relations)

Firstly, we think it is important to note that while much of the violence has been blamed, in some quarters, on coverage by the visual media, the month of November 1985 (the blanket started Nov 2) showed the second highest figure of deaths since the State of Emergency (August '85 being the highest).

Secondly, Frank Bird (in his study on loss and damage) estimates that for every one serious disabling injury there are 10 minor injuries. It has been estimated by people working closely with those injured in the unrest that for every 10 seriously injured people one person has died.

Therefore, if one were to look at this picture in the light of a 1:10 ratio (death:seriously injured), one would estimate that **at least 9 400 people have been seriously injured due to violence in our country in the last (almost) two years.**

DPSA does not know how many of these people will be permanently physically, sensorally or mentally disabled.