

INTERVIEWEE: Simon Mpembe: Station Commander

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PLACE OF INTERVIEW: Johannesburg Central Prison

My name is Simon Mpembe and I am the Station Commander at Johannesburg Central.

Q: How do you think the past activities of certain police officers in certain units have affected how the police function in the new democratic dispensation?

A: Well, I think what we need to understand here is that at that time the police were operating in a different environment. They were operating in an environment where you had a sovereign parliament. When you have a sovereign parliament, the parliament makes the legislation and those laws made by that parliament; the validity thereof cannot even be tested in a court. So you are operating in a situation where you don't have a democratic constitution. Today the constitution is supreme but at that time the parliament was supreme. At that time the rights of the citizens of this country were violated in every way and the parliament could do whatever it wanted to do. That's why it enacted discriminatory laws that were discriminating sections of the community. The police force you had at that time was part and parcel of the system. It could not exclude itself from that and that's why, in terms of the execution of its functions it violated the rights of people and used excessive force. The styles of policing that were utilized at that time because of the situation were punitive styles of policing, repressive policing. That was how the police found themselves in that environment and there was no way that they could separate themselves because they were part and parcel of the system. There was no separation of powers; everybody in the parliament was agreeing to do one thing whereas in a democratic country where you have a constitution there are powers that are separated, there are checks and balances. There were no checks and balances at that time and that is why we had that situation.

Q: Do you think that the legacy of that period continues to impact on the current dispensation and the relationship between the police service and the communities that you serve?

A: After 1994 there was training in terms of human rights. All the police officials in the country were trained in terms of human rights. There were lectures that were provided. You also had a situation where constitutional structures that were introduced. Those include your Independent Complaints Directorate, the Human Rights Commission, the Public Protector and the Inspector General of the Police and the Inspector General of Prisons to ensure that there is no more violation of human rights. These structures also work as a monitoring mechanism to ensure that the law enforcement agencies and even the government departments are operating within their powers and that there is no abuse of powers, like it happened in the past. In the past there was abuse of power because you had the supremacy of parliament but with the constitutional order it is different and that's why those monitoring structures are there.

Q: In your own experience what sort of practical changes do you see in terms of how general community interacts with the police?

A: The constitution itself helps to persuade communities to respect the law and be law abiding citizens, secondly police officials now uphold the constitution ensure that the lives of human beings are not violated. The styles of policing also changed in the new dispensation. You have new styles, like community policing, also preventative, and proactive and problem orientated styles of policing. These were the new styles that came with the new dispensation. We also embraced the changes that we saw in the country where you have the community having a say in terms of how they should be policed. This happens through the Community Police Forums (CPF). They also have a say on how they think their police stations should be resourced and where the crime hotspots in their areas are. This builds a better relationship and better communication between the police and the community, which you never had in the past.

Q: On that subject, maybe you could give us a taste of what the Johannesburg Central's Community Police Forum is up to and how long it has been in existence?

A: Yes, it's been running for quite sometime now and is working very well and is running a number of projects. We have a project that we are running with community patrollers and we have identified people and doing a screening of those patrollers who we are recruiting. We are also in the process of conducting a recruitment drive. We're recruiting lots of reservists in preparation for 2010 so that we will be ready to reduce crime levels in Johannesburg Central. So those projects are going very well. We also have relationships with business that have been very helpful in terms of Johannesburg Central. We also have taxi forums. So the interaction seems to be very good and it's something that you would never have had in the past because the police were operating on their own but presently the police and the community are operating in a partnership and that's why we're in the position to address these various problems.

Q: I was wondering, whether maybe you have any thoughts on what still needs to be done in terms of dealing with the past and also marrying that with the process of not being trapped in the past?

A: We as a nation were successful in achieving reconciliation in this country without bloodshed. And for that we need to compliment ourselves as a nation.

The lesson, especially for police officials is that in terms of the TRC, we have learnt lessons. Police officials are not above the law and under no circumstances should we go back to that period where we violate the rights of human beings in this country. As police the execution of our duties needs to be carried out within the parameters of the law.

Q: Commissioner is it important when in terms of understanding the past to make a distinction between political policing, the security branch of the SAPS, and many other members of the South African police of other branches, such as the uniform branch and so forth?

A: Well I think the distinction is already made because you can't operate that way anymore. In the past there was no distinction because in the past you had a sovereign parliament and everybody, the security police, the parliamentarians, all had to collaborate to deal with the opposition parties who were the enemy. That was the situation then but presently the police officials are there to uphold the law that is what is crucial. Every policeman knows that if you are violating the rights of people and you are not operating within the law or using excessive force, you can go to jail. That is how we were trained in terms of the culture of human rights.

Q: Can you tell us about the set up in Johannesburg Central and how many officers are based here, as well as, what kinds of units you've got operating here...and, if this is still the biggest police station in South Africa?

A: Indeed, it's true it's still the biggest police station in the country and in Africa. Actually our only competitor is New York. In terms of resources and personnel, we have about 695 personnel including civilians and operational members.

Q: And what specific units operate in the station today?

A: Well, in terms of the station you are looking at the Support Services that is your administration personnel, whilst your uniform members (your visible police members) and detectives are focusing on operational matters. We do have other units but those units do not belong to the station, they are units within the service like the Local Record Criminal Centre, which is provincial unit. We also have Crime Intelligence, Organized Crime, and the Firearm Registration Centre, all which are still located within our premises because of the centrality of the location.

Q: As, Station Commissioner here what do find to be the biggest challenge or challenges facing your jurisdiction?

A: There are a number of challenges, that is, such as crime reduction, especially the violent crimes, which the community itself has listed as their priority. Resources, we need more resources, especially human resources. For example, within Jo'burg city here, you find that there are 2.5 million people who come to do their shopping in the city from various provinces and even from the neighboring states, which then requires increased personnel. Resources in terms of more vehicles improved technology. But, also assistance from the Local Government whom we are already talking to assist with the crime reduction issue. Some of this crime is the result of the many vacant buildings in the city, which harbor a lot of criminals. You also have a lot of unstructured informal trading, unstructured taxi ranks, which are social factors contributing to crime, which definitely then require other role players, such as the Local Government, in order to address these issues. As long as those factors are not addressed we, as the police cannot do it alone. And, then also the attitudes of some of our police members, in terms of improving service delivery and understanding that we are now functioning in a democracy, because we obviously cannot say we have completely transformed the police service. However, we are very optimistic in terms of Johannesburg Central as a police station, because, for example, our local business and the general communities are happy with the service and the improvements that they've seen within the station.

Q: I wonder if you could comment on how you and your colleagues feel about the efforts to explore the past and the current changes through for example, commemorating the current police station?

A: I personally commend SAHA on initiating this project, because it is a sign that we are not hiding from our past, we have learnt something from our past. It also helps to show that government institutions have really been transformed. In the past I would not be here sitting here talking to you. The fact that you are here shows that we are exercising democracy and this project deepens democracy through promoting freedom of speech. It also serves to relate to future generations that this is what happened and all of us must never make the mistake of going back there.

END OF INTERVIEW

