

## **POLICE MUST TAKE INNER CITY CRIME SERIOUSLY**

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Sayed-Iqbal Mohamed, Metro councillor and chairman of the Inner City Community Police Forum, says community policing in the Warwick triangle has been woefully inadequate.

Interaction between the South African Police Services (SAPS) and the community is essential for the exchange of information on a reciprocal basis. Trust in the police is pivotal to solving most crime, through interactive policing.

But three major obstacles prevent the community from providing police with information - fear of retaliation; lack of interest, and distrust of the police.

Efforts to combat crime in Durban's inner city have once again been impeded because the community is faced with these obstacles. For seven years, businesses in Warwick Avenue, Albert Park and the Grey Street / West Street precincts have succumbed to the criminal activities of a marauding group of thugs - a gang of about 17 women and a few men, notoriously known as the "A-Team".

The modus operandi of these "bandit women" is to flood a shop with its gang members, snatch money and goods and walk out unhindered. Eighteen months ago, the Inner City Community Police Forum was established to tackle the spate of robberies by the A-Team, as well as armed robberies and other crimes.

Before the formation of the forum, an expensive camera was lent to a special police task team which monitored the A-Team for weeks. Video footage showed how its members operated from headquarters in Victoria Street, used a minibus and terrorised the business community.

But months later the video equipment had not been returned. When the forum threatened to involve the media, the video camera was returned within hours. However, no successful arrests of the bandit women were made.

Last year an outcry from the business community resulted in another task team, which boasted that the bandit women would be put behind bars and denied bail. The problem, police argued, was the reluctance of business people to lay charges. Within days, the number of business people laying charges began to increase because they were informed by the forum that the SAPS had committed itself to end the criminal activities of the A-Team once and for all.

Shortly after, some of the alleged bandit women were arrested, but bail was allowed. The bandit women are more active today than ever. As a result, fissures have developed in the delicate partnership between police and community. Community role-players feel that this is not the only crime-related project on which the SAPS has reneged, failed, or lied.

It took five years of hard work to get business, residents, street traders, religious and civic organisations to enter into a partnership that was not possible during the apartheid era. It meant putting aside a deep-seated suspicion of the SAPS and City Police. It also meant working with

members of the police who had been either indirectly or directly involved in covert political activities.

It appears that community policing means different things to different role-players. To the community, it is a partnership with the police to improve overall quality of life, to identify problems and prioritise action through the formulation of joint strategies. The philosophy is to transform social disorder and urban decay by implementing proactive programmes.

Eighteen months ago, when the community structures together with the SAPS and City Police launched the inner city community police forum, it was envisaged that the three captains of Nicol Square, Pine Parkade and Broad Street satellite stations would have the autonomy to act as "sub-chiefs", strategising closely with community structures. In this way those directly involved, the "foot soldiers", would be able to solve or prevent crime-related problems.

But it seems the police have not translated the new philosophy into action. C R Swart Square still dictates policy and determines thinking, although sometimes heated arguments and disagreements are allowed. On the other hand, the community sees the captains of the satellite stations as irresponsible and unable to deliver.

Few are aware that Nicol Square is sometimes fortunate enough to have 15 SAPS members (including the captain) to be deployed in the Grey Street precinct - the area from Commercial Road to the racecourse and between Albert and Russell streets.

The ratio of police to business, employees, residents and commuters is staggering even if one were to add the 30 SAPS members from Broad Street (who operate on a 24-hour shift) and 23 from Pine Parkade. Approximately 250 000 commuters come into the city daily. Add to this the residents of Albert Park, Grey Street and the rest of the CBD and we get a (conservative) ratio of 1 policeman or policewoman for every 5 000 people.

At Easter and other major festive periods, criminals find a haven in the rest of the CBD because almost all SAPS members from the three satellite stations are deployed on the beachfront. Grey Street seems to be a low priority. Crime could have been worse had it not been for business's employing private security guards.

Business is disillusioned with the promise of a bobby on the beat, the sector policing, bike units and crime prevention strategies that have never left the thinking and talking phase.

What is needed is a dedicated, reliable police management team which can boost the morale of the foot soldiers who are required to perform on a 1:5 000 ratio. The SAPS has to travel the long period of rebuilding trust, involving the community in decision-making and establishing effective communication channels. It has to introduce visible and sector policing, with the community being an integral part of its anti-crime projects. Above all, more men and women need to be deployed in the inner city if the SAPS is serious about fighting crime.