

**AFTER NINE PEOPLE WERE KILLED WHEN A LONE GUNMAN RAN AMOK IN A NORMALLY GENTEEL NORTHERN NATAL TOWN, SARA JAGWANTH, RESEARCHER AT NATAL UNIVERSITY'S CENTRE FOR CRIMINAL JUSTICE WENT TO INVESTIGATE. SHE FOUND THE INSENSITIVITY OF MANY WHITES TO THE RESENTMENT AND HURT OF THE BLACKS HAD MATERIALLY CHANGED THE FACE OF LADYSMITH.**

# Killing spree

I AM NO stranger to the town of Ladysmith, having visited my family there over several years. But when we drove into the town on the Friday morning, four days after nine people were gunned down in a crowded shopping centre, I knew then that the genteel face of this northern Natal town had changed forever.

Ladysmith is no stranger to tragedy or

drama, and as the mayor, Ruston Muller, put it: "We always bounce back".

But since the shooting spree on the morning of January 20 which left nine people dead and scores of others injured, the resentment, anger and pain seems destined to endure long after the blood stains have been washed from the pavements.

The killing spree began that Monday

morning on a nearby farm, when Kallie Delpert allegedly shot dead his father and a domestic worker, and ended an hour later in the busy business centre in a trail of death and mayhem.

Save for Delpert's father, all the victims were black. This has left the majority of the blacks in Ladysmith believing that the attack was a racially motivated one.

Though this is emphatically denied by the mayor, who dismissed the theory as "bad publicity for the town," the racial hostility, bitterness and anger is clearly evident, especially in the wake of widespread allegations of preferential treatment given to Delpert.

As Cosatu spokesman AK Rassool remarked, emotions have steadily grown into a "terrible spiral" and many are asking if this tragedy can indeed be classed together with the ravaging floods that have plagued the town in the past.

The alleged attitude of many whites after the killing has done little to allay the tensions in the community. At least three Indian businessmen, who declined to be named, described the recent "arrogant and almost triumphant" attitude of whites which was not prevalent before the killings, as if giving tacit support for the incident.

There have also been increasing reports from black workers that their white employers are treating the incident as a joke and have expressed open support for Delpert. One shop steward has already confirmed that he is investigating complaints from workers regarding a remark from a supervisor that "Kallie had not done a good enough job".

The shop steward remarked that it was indeed sad that it took a spray of bullets and the blood of nine residents to flush to the fore the "bigotry and conservatism" that has long pervaded the minds of the conservative whites in Ladysmith. Soon after the shooting, Mr Mathe, the regional director of the

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Is there a solution?

There is certainly no quick fix solution. In the situation we are in, as long as there are inadequate people with access to guns, we should not be surprised if further such incidents occur. These incidents are part and parcel of the violence which is so deeply embedded in the structure of our society that the road ahead is a long and arduous one. It calls for a new total strategy of a completely different order to the old one, which involves a radical restructuring of society.

There is, firstly, a need for a far tighter control over access to dangerous weapons — the problem is far greater than simply allowing licences, because illegal access is so widespread. Weapon control involves also the question of private armies which include not only MK, but private security companies,

and, in Natal, the KwaZulu police.

Secondly, an overhaul of legal/judicial system, itself subverted by the power of the security establishment, is imperative. Concern is quite correctly being expressed over the cavalier way in which prison sentences are being reduced by the Department of Correctional Services.

Proficient investigation and sentencing is a matter in need of *urgent* attention.

In conjunction with a new political dispensation which sets about correcting the gross imbalances in power should go a concerted effort to destroy racism at all levels; the role of contact, and improved communication, is paramount.

There is no time to lose. If the root causes of violence in its various manifestations — including the indiscriminate killing of blacks by whites — are not addressed *now* the prospects of a protracted civil war can only increase. ●

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## Laws have changed — but it will take generations to change attitudes

Northern Natal Council of Churches, said he had witnessed white families “proudly” pointing out bullet-riddled walls to their children “as if it were a monument”.

“This kind of insensitivity is simply beyond explanation and it seems as if most whites here have not realised just how painful this incident has been for us,” he said.

Ironically, the incident has acted as a unifying factor in the townships, especially between ANC and IFP supporters, and the “black community is united in expressing its outrage at the shooting,” said Mr Mathe.

“While the magnitude of this tragedy cannot be undermined, it has brought to the attention of the world the plight of blacks in forgotten conservative towns such as Ladysmith,” said a community leader.

Dr Ahmed Sader, the chairman of the ANC branch in Ladysmith, said that the incident brought to the surface “underlying racial tensions in the town”. At the same time, many community members warned against the complacent and self-congratulatory attitudes that have emerged since talk of the “new South Africa” began two years ago.

They highlighted the point that while laws have indeed changed, it is going to take generations of painful re-adjustment before a significant change in attitudes is seen.

**T**HERE IS now a growing call by community members for the establishment of suitable avenues of public complaint structures in Ladysmith. “Let us use this incident to focus on the lack of service organisations and avenues of complaint in Ladysmith,” one community member said.

Mr Mathe described the growing dissatisfaction on the part of the black community regarding their perceived failure of the criminal justice system to operate effectively. He commented that “if the anger and fears of the black community are not addressed, then the potential for violent conflict is very high.”

There is increasing concern that there has been an improper interference with the course of justice amidst allegations

of Delport’s preferential treatment while in custody.

What has especially contributed to the popular notion that justice will not take its course is the fact that Delport was allegedly brought to subsequent court hearings in a private car, without handcuffs, and was later seen by reporters chatting with police in the charge office.

Anxious to defuse the situation, police have already stated they would investigate the complaints about Delport’s treatment while in custody. According to several community leaders, black people are “outraged” and feel very “betrayed” that Delport is said to be being given special treatment while in custody.

“The incident was patterned along the lines of similar political tragedies in South Africa and unless a sense of justice is perceived by the community, I fear the possibility of people forming an army to protect themselves,” Dr Sader said.

This sentiment was endorsed by Mr Rassool who said that the community is no longer assured of police protection and are already talking about arming themselves.

**B**UT SOME of the most vocal complaints to be aired since the massacre have been about police action, or the alleged inaction, during the shooting.

“I am torn between my Christian principles, but I cannot help thinking that if he were a black man, it is more than likely that he would have been shot even before he was arrested,” said Mr Mathe.

Similar sentiment was echoed by many black people in Ladysmith, who have complained that the history of the South African Police in dealing with black suspects has done little to dispel existing suspicions.

While much of the details of the drama that morning is still unclear, what can be established is that Delport allegedly shot and killed people at four different places in the city centre. Most of the victims, six in total, were killed in a local shopping centre, which was the second outbreak of shooting. The entire spree lasted about twenty minutes.

“The police could have stopped Delport before he got to the shopping centre, where he claimed his first

victims,” said Mr Mathe, a view held by other witnesses who claim that Delport could have been stopped within minutes of his firing the first shots.

Some witnesses alleged that it took the police between five to ten minutes to get to the shopping centre, by which time Delport had already left and allegedly killed another two people — including a traffic officer — at different locations in the city centre.

“It is inconceivable that the police took about 25 minutes to respond from the time the shooting started,” said one witness. Delport was only apprehended by the police on his way out of town.

Investigating this point, research staff at the Centre for Criminal Justice conducted a test by driving from the police station to the shopping centre. With two obligatory stops at robots, the duration of this trip was less than 140 seconds.

Surviving victims of the shooting have also complained about the delay in getting them to the hospital. One of the victims, who did not wish to be named, said “had the victims been white, it is unlikely that there would have been the hour-long delay in getting them to the hospital”.

At the time of arrest, Delport was reportedly found with more than 3000 rounds of ammunition in his possession.

Dr Sader said that the community is questioning how so unstable a man came to be in possession of such a large quantity of ammunition.

A neighbour has described Delport as “trigger-happy” and who reached for his gun at the slightest sign of trouble. Mr Bonnie York, whose ammunition store is metres away from where Delport allegedly went on the shooting spree, said that Delport purchased most of his ammunition from the store.

A record of every purchase was kept in a register, but according to Mr York, it was likely that Mr Delport accumulated his ammunition supply over the years.

“Between him and his father I would say that they owned at least ten firearms, many of which they bought in this store,” said Mr York.

“The number of firearms and the amount of ammunition in Delport’s possession far exceeded what would be acceptable for the purposes of protection and it is here that the police must be seen to be acting if black fears are to be dispelled,” said Mr Mathe.

As we drove out of Ladysmith after a day of exhausting emotions, I realised then that Ladysmith has now become a strange and unfamiliar town to me. ●