

Briefing by Kwazulu-Natal Minister of Transport on the Commission of Inquiry into Taxi Violence in Kwazulu-Natal

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The taxi industry in KwaZulu-Natal has indeed come a long way. Two years ago, we would never have imagined that this volatile and chaotic sector of public transport would have made such dramatic headway in stabilising and growing into a formidable player in the economy.

When one considers the forces at play in the taxi industry in this province, the progress we have made in the formalisation process is nothing short of a miracle. It is no secret that on many occasions, taxi violence posed a serious threat to the stability of this province.

However, there are still elements within and outside the taxi industry that have gone all out to derail the formalisation process. Their agenda is much broader than transport - holding the process at ransom.

To this end, we are gathered here today to announce the appointment of a Judicial Commission of Inquiry into Taxi Violence in KwaZulu-Natal. The Commission will recommence working at the beginning June 2000 to hear evidence and take appropriate actions as prescribed in its Terms of Reference.

The delay in the appointment of this Commission was due to the nature of its composition. Being a judicial body, we have been compelled to undergo a number of legal processes. In this regard such a Commission is armed to subpoena any person who might have any relevant information that will assist in our quest to uproot the culture of impunity. No stone will be left unturned.

This Commission will be the "TRC" of the taxi industry. It will interview various affected parties regarding taxi-related violence in KwaZulu-Natal.

This is a sequel of a number of initiatives taken in our quest for a united, Stabilised and economical viable industry. Negota was one appointed to investigate, mainly, Empangeni violence which left fourteen people dead at a taxi rank last year. Its findings will also form the basis for this Judicial Commission.

In the past four years we have developed structures and systems to manage conflict situations within the taxi industry. We have adopted two approaches to these problems, namely mediation and the registration process.

Mediation

This conflict resolution committee, under the KwaZulu-Natal Taxi Task Team has managed to contain volatile situations through creative and concerted mediation efforts. In this regard, there are many success stories we can talk about such as the conflict at Pongola and Mkuze as well as Hammersdale and Pinetown and many other areas. Such mediation is still continuing in many parts of the province resulting in numerous associations or individuals who were at war with each other burying their differences for the common good of their associations and the commuting public.

The Registration Process

The majority of taxi associations in the province have enthusiastically participated in the formalisation of their operations. Through this process most of them operate peacefully today. Of the 286 associations, only 20 associations are still engulfed in some conflict.

Undoubtedly, mediation and the registration process have contributed immensely towards the positive outlook permeating the taxi industry. They have set the foundation for the successful implementation of other related programmes for the taxi industry, namely:

- The Democratisation of the taxi industry;
- The Recapitalisation Programme; and
- The Training of drivers and operators.

However, we still have cases where both mediation and the registration process have failed to resolve conflicts.

Mediation and the Durban Long Distance Taxi Conflict

Violence escalated in spite of such interventions, as is the case of the Durban Long Distance Taxi Association. This conflict has spread to many parts of the province. It is common knowledge that most of the violent incidents still taking place in areas such as Empangeni, Msinga, Kranskop, Nongoma, etc. are related to this case.

All attempts to resolve this problem through mediation have failed.

The Durban Long Distance Taxi Association invited His Majesty, the King and myself to a Peace Rally in November 1995. We were all excited that industry leaders have taken the initiative to talk peace and gave all the support we possibly could to ensure the success of the initiative.

However, after this peace rally violence erupted at the rank. Many people were killed in a battle over the control of the association and the rank. Many teams have since assembled over the years to try and resolve this conflict, but to no avail.

Initially, I facilitated discussions between the two warring factions and agreements were reached. However, after a few days the attack and counter-attacks resumed. The KwaZulu-Natal Cabinet then appointed Minister C Mthethwa to assist me and we jointly facilitate a peace settlement. Again, after agreements were reached, they were later broken.

The following teams also attempted to resolve this conflict:

- The Commission appointed by Cabinet, chaired by Mrs Theodore Ngidi; and
- The Nazareth Church, under Reverend M Shozi

After all these attempts failed, we came to a conclusion that no amount of mediation will help us resolve this conflict. It is a security matter which required appropriate police response.

The Registration Process and the Durban Long Distance Taxi Association

The Durban Long Distance Taxi Association was one of the first associations to register with the Taxi Registrar. Subsequently, this association mobilised other long distance taxi associations to participate in the formalisation process. To us this was the beginning of a process to end the conflict and we thought that we were laying the foundation for a peaceful long distance operation in KwaZulu-Natal.

However, even the registration process has not succeeded in stemming the tide of violence within the Durban Long Distance Taxi Association. It is clear to us that there are more underlying factors behind this conflict.

Some of the reasons for this continual conflict are:

- Whilst Durban Station is a base, it is spreading throughout the province;
- There is a realignment of groups in many parts of the province such as Ladysmith, Kranskop, Empangeni, Nongoma, etc;
- No perpetrators have been successfully prosecuted; and
- There are unconfirmed reports of bribery, dockets disappearing, etc. Even my department is not spared accusations of being part of the problem.

It is in the light of the above circumstances that a Judicial Commission of Inquiry with wide-ranging powers to conduct a 'clean-up' operation of the taxi industry was proposed. It is not going to be analysing the taxi industry's problems but will provide facilities for dealing with the culprits, be it from the taxi industry or government.

The lives of thousands of commuters who rely on public transport every day cannot be held at ransom any longer.

We are gearing ourselves to execute our mandate - the provision of a reliable public transport system. We are implementing the Recapitalisation programme which will ensure that the taxi industry plays an important role in revitalising the public transport sector and I believe that we are succeeding through the support and participation of the majority of the taxi industry in KwaZulu-Natal.

I am therefore pleased to announce today that the following persons have been appointed to serve as members of the Judicial Commission of Inquiry into taxi violence in KwaZulu-Natal:

1. Chairperson - Judge Aboobaker
2. Commissioners
 - C. Ngidi;
 - J. Wills; and
 - S. Kuboni;

Members of the Commission will be meeting soon to finalise their implementation plans in order to commence working in June. The administrative centre of the Commission will be housed at the Pietermaritzburg Magistrates Court and all interim enquiries should be directed to the Director: Transportation - Mr George Mahlalela at (033) 355 8886.

I am making an appeal to everyone in this industry who favours peace and progress, and those who want to see this powerful industry claim its rightful place in the business sector to co-operate with the Commission and to resist and expose these corrupt forces.

With a co-ordinated crusade between the Department of Transport, the Commission of Inquiry and the taxi industry, we can expose these agents provocateur and obliterate the campaign to destabilise the industry. The taxi industry needs to send a clear message to these forces that it will not be manipulated any longer and that it is determined to advance into the 21st century as a unified and controlled industry.