

ADDRESS BY THE KWAZULU-NATAL MEC FOR TRANSPORT, COMMUNITY SAFETY AND LIAISON, BHEKI NTULI (MPL), ON THE OCCASION OF THE PROVINCIAL TAXI LEKGOTLA 2020, ELANGENI HOTEL IN ETHEKWINI, 24 OCTOBER 2020

- Programme Director, Ms Simanga Ngubo;
- Mayor of eThekweni Metro, Councillor Mxolisi Kaunda;
- Chairperson of KZN-SANTACO Mr Boy Zondi and entire SANTACO leadership;
- KZN Provincial Police Commissioner K.E Jula and SAPS Management;
- Other organizations present;
- Representatives of the Metered Taxi Industry;
- Representatives of the E-hailing Services;
- Transportation Committees;
- Industry Experts;
- Municipal Managers present;
- Senior government officials;
- Members of the media;

Programme Director, thank you very much for affording me an opportunity to address this important KwaZulu-Natal Provincial Taxi Lekgotla involving our stakeholders and various role players in the public transport space, mainly the taxi industry.

This Provincial Taxi Lekgotla could not have come at a better time as we are all seized with the issue of professionalizing the taxi industry and investigating sustainable ways of shaping the taxi industry for the future, which will benefit many generations to come.

What makes this Provincial Lekgotla even more meaningful is the fact that it coincides with the roll-out of the October Transport Month – when government first launched the initiative in 2005 one of its primary focus was to pay special attention to the public transport industry.

The October Transport Month theme adopted this year ***"Together Shaping the future of transport"*** is an illustration of the focus and resolve we have as government to place transport at the centre of all activities. When we say transport is the heartbeat of economic growth, we deliberately mean there is nothing that can move without being transported, be it through aviation, maritime, rail or road.

The taxi industry is responsible for transporting more than 20 million people everyday in this country. This means the industry is the biggest commuter of our public, mainly the working class. It is this strategic role played by the industry which compelled us to grab with both hands, the opportunity presented by the Minister of Transport Fikile Mbalula, who initiated the National Discourse on the future of the taxi industry.

This gathering here today is a culmination of long discussions and consultations the province has been having with the industry stakeholders, including the taxi industry, learner transport operators, metered taxi operators, e-hailing services, industry experts, transportation committees and municipalities.

We have listened, exchanged views and ideas, agreed and disagreed on some of the issues – but what is common is that we all want to see a professional and regulated taxi industry in this country. I can boldly say that all stakeholders gathered here today have the best interest of the industry at heart.

Programme Director, we would have failed as this generation of leaders both from the industry and government if we failed to utilize this platform provided by the Minister to effect much needed changes and build a taxi industry that is transformed and reliable.

When approaching this lekgotla we must take our emotions and egos away but ask ourselves a very critical question – How do we want the taxi industry to be like in the next ten, twenty and fifty years from now? Like all modern developing countries, working citizens must be able to leave their private cars at home and make use of public transport and that can only be achieved if it is run professionally.

For us to reach the envisaged level of the taxi industry we must address the four fundamental areas of discussion, namely:

- Industry unity and leadership
- Industry regulations
- Industry empowerment
- Industry professionalization and customer care

These four critical areas are not exhaustive but lay an important foundation for a stable, sustainable and professionally run taxi industry.

These must compliment a number of legislations that have been promulgated since 1996 until now and the number of policies which have been championed by this government to improve the state of the taxi industry.

We want to build a taxi industry that is characterized by unity and leadership structures that are accountable. An industry that has no space for guns and for the powerful to rule at the expense of ordinary members.

We want an industry with common norms and standards, which are applicable to all members equally, regardless of positions. We want an industry that can unite and invest in other business opportunities and maximize their benefit in the transport value-chain.

We want an industry where commuters feel safe and where they are treated as real clients. We want a professional industry that is complying like all other business in the country and whose employees can also be covered in other benefits like all others.

We also need to use this lekgotla to address critical challenges facing the taxi industry, including, among others, the level of instability in some of the taxi associations in the province, the levels of killings and the use of hitmen (izinkabi), we also need to discuss frankly the role of private security companies in the industry. In this province we have had many engagements with PSIRA discussing the role of private security, who at most are in the forefront of violence in the taxi industry.

Iqhaza lalezi zinkampani zonogada ezigcwele emarenki kumele sizibuze ukuthi ngabe ukulekelela ukuthi kube nokuthula noma zikhanda uthuthuva ukuze kuzohlale njalo kukhona umsebenzi kuzona.

We must address here, today the issue of the random collection of monies at taxi ranks. This lekgotla must also address the issue of those who are powerful whose vehicles do not queue like others at taxi ranks but always prioritized and always make money when other taxi owners are suffering.

The main source of these conflicts emanates from rank and route dispute, encroachments, collection of fees, power struggles, greed and corruption. Yizo lezi izinkinga ezidala ukuthi imboni bese iphenduka inkundla yokuchitheka kwegazi. Kuzomele sithi uma sakha imboni yekusasa nemboni engcono kodwa sibheke ukuthi lesi sihlava sodlame nemikhuba ewumsusa walo sibhekana kanjani nakho.

The situation continues unabated in this province despite numerous interventions made by the government, working with the security agencies and the leadership of SANTACO. Out of the 246 taxi associations very few have not had problems in the past. We are the first to acknowledge that the situation is improving, however there are few who remain stubborn. Kusakela kubaphathiswa ebebengaphambi kwami basebenza ngokuzikhandla ukuxazulula izinkinga nami ngisaxazulula zona. Manje umbuzo ukuthi koze kube nini?

The most painful reality is that not only operators are now targeted but commuters as well. Areas such as KwaSwayimane, Mandeni, Richards Bay, Newcastle, Howick, Pietermaritzburg, KwaNongoma, Mzinyathi, Pietermaritzburg and Ladysmith – are among those remaining with serious challenges. La eNdwedwe and District nibulala nize nibulalale ngisho abagibeli. Kanjalo nakwaSwayimane. Okusho ukuthi le mboni isibhuqabhuqa isizwe sonke ngisho nezingane, ngisho nabangenacala.

The latest report presented by SAPS in the province indicates that there are **73 murder cases** this year alone and **14 suspects have been arrested and charged** (there are no convictions for the current year due to the fact that Covid-19 cases were not trialed). Furthermore, there are **16 attempted murder cases recorded this year** and **9 suspects have been arrested** and charged (there are no convictions for the current year due to the fact that Covid-19 cases were not trialed). Lastly, **five (5)** cases are being investigated for the possession of illegal firearms and **ten (10) suspects** have been arrested, but no one has been found guilty as yet as investigations are still ongoing. Since the inception of the Taxi Violence Task Team several years ago, there has been at least **33 life imprisonment sentences** have been meted against the suspects.

Ngempela kusho ukuthi sinobaba nomama abangenamahloni nabangena nembeza lapha...!

As part of the taxi violence turn-around strategy which was discussed in the Provincial Executive Council recently, we agreed on improving the capacity of the Provincial Taxi Task Team, improve intelligence, monitor hotspot areas, and improve visible policing.

Programme Director, out of the experiences of dealing with areas that resisted efforts to stabilise them, the Provincial Executive Council (Cabinet) previously also approved a number of strategies that the Department implemented to deal with instability and where there are clear indications of success where they have been implemented. These are the following:

- The Rank Management System which was implemented in Newcastle. An integral part of the strategy is to ensure that Private Security Companies are employed and paid for by government to protect public transport facilities within municipalities. The same strategy was tried in Hibiscus Coast Municipality although the industry has raised some reservations in relation to the deployment of a Private Security Company without proper consultation. Other aspects of the rank management system include:
 - Perimeter fencing
 - Association Recognition Stickers
 - Issuing of rank permits to authorised Associations
 - Automated Boom gates
 - Physical Security
 - Number plate Recognition Cameras
 - Surveillance Cameras
- The Litigation Strategy: This is a strategy which is employed to ensure that the court system is engaged by legal practitioners on behalf of government to ensure that public transport instability cases are adequately dealt with and given the priority to ensure that justice in each case prevails.

- Implementation of extra-ordinary measures in terms of section 91 of the National Land Transport Act, in areas where violence continues to persist despite interventions by government. This is used as a last resort and would ordinarily be followed by the closure of ranks and/or suspension of routes. Whilst it is not a preferred course of action, the Department was forced to employ this in KwaMaphumulo, Newcastle and KwaNdengezi in 2015 alone. This was also implemented in Ladysmith. None of these associations have transgressed past the declaration of the extra-ordinary measures, however the areas remain under constant monitoring wherein persistence may trigger the ultimate response which is the suspension of operations and rank closures.

Although these are drastic measures, the intended beneficiaries of these efforts are the users of public transport facilities who are the ones that will be negatively affected by the full implementation of these measures.

Programme Director, we are commitment to rooting out fraud and corruption which is a cancer that is destroying our government institutions. Recently, five officials in the Department were arrested and charged with 252 counts of fraud and corruption. The arrests come after an internal investigation was initiated by the Department which was prompted by various allegations that these five officials were issuing operating permits to taxi operators without proper documentation. It is alleged that they were charging R25 000 per permit and the total value amounts to approximately R7 million.

I wish to reiterate that it is totally unacceptable that officials are abusing their power to serve personal interest. Their unscrupulous actions may extend far and beyond fraud and corruption but could include the tragic loss of lives due to disputes over operating permits and routes. More arrests are imminent as investigations are ongoing and those from the taxi industry who were colluding with these officials will also face the full might of the law.

Programme Director, all industry stakeholders will appreciate that this province since 2012 has been convening the Provincial Taxi Indaba's to open platform for engagement with the taxi industry and to find common ground on important issues facing the industry. The ongoing engagements have resulted to a number of achievements, including the introduction of a modern Information Technology System. The system's main aim is to reduce the turn-around time in the issuing of Operating Licenses and ensure accuracy.

After robust engagements and economic viability studies, the Department together with the industry took a decision in 2016 to uplift the moratoriums on operating licenses which was imposed in 2012. The memorandum paved the way for phase 3. This is the phase we are currently implementing using the data which was agreed to by the government and the taxi industry.

The Department has also undertaken to open new Provincial Regulatory Entity (PRE) offices in regions to make the service accessible. Previously all operators had to travel to Pietermaritzburg - and today we are proud to say five new office have been opened in Ladysmith, Portsheptone, eMpangeni, Mbazwana and now in eThekweni. In total we have issued more than 22 000 operating licenses.

We have also improved our systems and introduced the SMS notification service to update applicants on their application developments.

Through the resolutions taken in our previous engagements with the industry we embarked on a data purification process.

Programme Director, our department has been at the centre of driving economic transformation in the taxi industry. We now have a policy in place which approved the participation of taxi operators in the mainstream subsidized bus operation. We started with Ugu Bus services and moved to other parts of the province.

Sifuna ukubona osomabhizinisi bakithi bamatekisi bengena begamanxa emikhakheni ehlukeneyezomnotho kwezokuthutha. Uhlelo lwethu lokuthutha abafundi lungolunye oluhlose ukuhlomulisa abantu bemboni kanti ziningi nezinye izinhlelo ngaphansi kohlelo luka-Operation Vula oluholwa nguNdunankulu uKhuzeni. Sifuna nibe nezindawo zenu zamathayi, nibe nezindawo zenu zamagaragi kaPetrol kanye nezindawo ezidayisa izinsimbi zezimoto.

Programme Director – in conclusion, we hope that through this engagement that we will find common ground and be able to make sound recommendations to the National Taxi Lekgotla. This province is central in shaping the future of the taxi industry and I have no doubt that the deliberations today will lay a solid foundation for a long-lasting legacy of a violence free and professional industry.

Ngiyabonga.