

## Chapter 5 The Piet Retief area

# Mpumalanga

### **The Piet Retief police district**

**T**he Piet Retief police district spans 4 000 square kilometres of Mpumalanga's Eastern Highveld region. Situated in the south-eastern corner of Mpumalanga, the district's eastern boundary is 30 kilometres from the international border between South Africa and Swaziland. Eighty kilometres to the south-east is the provincial border separating Mpumalanga from KwaZulu-Natal.

There are approximately 300 small and medium-sized family-owned farms in the Piet Retief police district, as well as two large forestry plantations, owned by Sappi and Mondi, respectively. In the 1950s, the vast majority of family-owned farms specialised in maize production, but all farmers in the area have diversified their output considerably during the last four decades. Cattle, and to a lesser extent pigs and chickens, are farmed in the area. Several dozen farms in the Piet Retief police district sport small forestry plantations. A handful specialises exclusively in forestry. (As is explained later, the widespread introduction of timber farming has reshaped the local labour market, demographic movement and the physical terrain considerably, and forms an import backdrop to the nature and incidence of armed robbery on Piet Retief's farms.) Sheep farming was common in the 1970s and 1980s, but prolific stock theft in the area resulted in the near extinction of sheep farming on the Eastern Highveld as a whole.

The majority of the 300 or so farms in the area are family businesses that have been passed down from father to son over three or four generations. Approximately 160 of Piet Retief's farms are owned by German-speaking farmers whose ancestors settled on the Eastern Highveld in the late 19th century. There has been remarkable continuity in this close-knit, German-speaking community during the last 120 years. While descendants of German-speaking Piet Retief farming families periodically leave the area to settle in Gauteng – usually in the small German-speaking

communities on the East Rand – the vast majority of farms are owned and run by the descendants of the original German settlers.<sup>1</sup>

Local farmers and security personnel describe the rural labour market in the Piet Retief district as ‘traditional farm labour’. The Mthethwa chieftaincy – approximately 8 000 people – inhabits 27 farms and surrounding areas between Piet Retief and Luneberg. The Hlatswayo chieftaincy – approximately 10 000 people – inhabits 22 farms and surrounding areas in the Comondale district to the south of Piet Retief. Both groups have been in the area since the mid-19th century and both constitute the bulk of farm labour in the southern part of the Piet Retief district. Since the late 19th century, black settlements in the area have exchanged labour in return for grazing land. It is difficult to determine precisely when wage labour was introduced into the area. There is a consensus among the labourers interviewed that, as late as the 1960s, labour was exchanged exclusively for grazing land, not for wages. Some place the introduction of wages into the local economy in the mid-1970s, some in the early 1980s.

The vast majority of young men who grow up in traditional farm labour families in the Piet Retief area migrate to Gauteng, almost invariably to the East Rand, in early adulthood. Some settle there, others return to the Piet Retief area with spouses and family.

The relationship between farmers and traditional farm labour appears to be, despite claims to the contrary by local farmers and security personnel, increasingly hostile and distrustful, and sometimes violent.

Traditional farm labour does not exhaust the local labour market. Timber farmers generally employ contract workers for harvesting. Their contracts usually last for the duration of one harvest. With the exception of machine operators, timber harvesting is relatively unskilled work, and few farmers employ the same people year in and year out. Contract workers are often recruited from northern KwaZulu-Natal and are transported in and out of the Piet Retief district at dawn and dusk. Other contract labour is recruited from several of the informal settlements that have mushroomed in the Piet Retief area since the early 1990s.

Two of Piet Retief’s informal settlements are situated on the periphery of the town itself. Phoswa Village, immediately south of Piet Retief’s township, was formed in late 1994. The area was, until the early 1990s, a family-owned timber farm. The Piet Retief town council bought the land in 1994 to develop for low-income residential use. Before the council could establish an infrastructure, the area was invaded by several hundred land-hungry families. Today, security personnel estimate that several

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thousand people live in Phoswa Village. It has neither running water nor electricity. A lucrative form of business in the formal township is the selling of water to the residents of the informal settlement. The settlement has neither street names nor shack numbers. Piet Retief police claim that the area is almost impossible to police. On the few occasions when crime suspects are found, the police claim, the complainant often cannot be found in the dense, unmapped labyrinths of the settlement.

On the opposite side of the formal township is another large informal settlement, Mangosotho, which was formed in 1995 after a land invasion by a group of several hundred families from the densely populated Dumbe Trust land, situated more than 100 kilometres south of Piet Retief. Mangosotho is far less dense than Phoswa Village and extends several kilometres north of Piet Retief.

Security personnel in the area have no clear idea of who lives in Phoswa Village and Mangosotho. Anecdotal evidence suggests that an eclectic and cosmopolitan mix of people have settled there, a significant minority temporarily, the vast majority for good. Piet Retief finds itself on two regional thoroughfares used by illegal immigrants to get to Gauteng – one from Swaziland, the other from Mozambique. It is safe to assume that a fair proportion of the population in the two settlements are Mozambican and Swazi.

Phoswa Village and Mangosotho are by no means the only visible signs of either land hunger or regional migration in the Piet Retief district. Security personnel say that the worker compounds on the Mondi property are home to about 30 000 people, the bulk of whom neither work for Mondi, nor have any connection to Mondi employees.

Farmers in the area are deeply troubled by the mounting pressures exerted by land hunger. Many farmers in the area say that an increasing number of people who live on their land are strangers who neither work in their fields, nor pay rent. The southern-most strip of the district comprises empty farms used by their owners for grazing only during the winter months. Every farm in that area, according to members of the Piet Retief commando, is occupied by scores of families who settle on the farmlands during the summer months.

### **Farm and smallholding attacks**

Between January and September 1999, serious violent crimes against owners and occupants of farms and smallholdings in Mpumalanga rose by 33.3% compared to the same period in 1998. There were 112 attacks in the first nine months of 1999, compared to 84 attacks in the first nine months of 1998. Ninety of the 112 attacks in 1999 occurred on farms, and 22 on smallholdings. Of a total of 145 victims, 93

were white and 52 black. Just over half of the victims were between 51 and 75 years of age. One in three armed robberies during the 1998 period resulted in the murder of the victim, compared to one in three-and-a-half during the 1999 period.

On the Eastern Highveld, farm attacks rose by 46% during the first nine months of 1999 compared to the same period in 1998: 28 attacks in the nine-month period in 1998 compared to 41 in 1999. In the Piet Retief police district, farm attacks rose by 40% during the first nine months of 1999 compared to the same period in 1998: seven attacks compared to five.

## Case studies

### *Robbery of firearm and cash*

On 12 November 1998, Mrs A<sup>2</sup> was returning home to her farm, about two kilometres from the Mangosotho informal settlement, at about 17h00 on a Tuesday afternoon. Mrs A runs a tuckshop in Sulphur Springs, 70 kilometres from her farm. The 12th of each month is pension day in the Sulphur Springs area, and Mrs A's tuckshop takings are always high on this date. On arriving home, Mrs A found that her farm gate was shut, an unusual occurrence. The area around the gate was covered by dense bush. Mrs A left her bakkie running, leaving her Colt .38 in the cabin, to open the gate. She was attacked by three men as she made her way back to her car. One of the men addressed her in Zulu. "We've got you, granny," he said. The three suspects took Mrs A's Colt .38 and R30 000 in cash. They hit Mrs A repeatedly over the head with a plank, knocking her unconscious, and fled on foot, leaving her bakkie behind. None of the three men appeared to have firearms. Detectives found the tracks of the three men on a dirt track that winds its way into Mangosotho. The tracks disappeared after 100 metres and the three suspects were not found. Two months later, Mrs A's gun was found by police in Boksburg on the East Rand of Gauteng. It had been used there in an armed robbery. Mrs A's home had a two-way radio, but the radio was of little help under the circumstances. If Mrs A had had a panic button around her neck, it is conceivable that she would have been able to access it during the attack.

Four points, which emerge again in the other case studies below, are worth noting:

- The suspects were after firearms and cash. (Mrs A believes that the suspects left her bakkie because they would have had to drive it in reverse for more than 200 metres before getting to a public road.)
- It is reasonable to assume that the suspects knew Mrs A was returning from a lucrative day at the Sulphur Springs tuck shop. The attack was planned and well informed.

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- The suspects appeared to use the sprawling and largely unpoliced Mangosotho settlement as refuge immediately after the attack.
  - One or more of the attackers appear to have links to the East Rand.

That Mrs A runs a tuckshop in Sulpher Springs is not widely known in the Piet Retief area. The suspects must have received information from sources with a detailed knowledge of Mrs A's movements. Mrs A identified four people with an intimate knowledge of her routines, all employed as drivers in her son-in-law's transport business.

### *Attempted armed robbery*

In August 1999, Mr and Mrs B, whose farm is 20 kilometres from the Mahamba border post with Swaziland, were attacked by two men on a Sunday morning when they returned to their home from church. The couple grew suspicious when their dogs did not come out to greet them. On getting out of the car to open the gate, two men attacked Mrs B, hitting her on the head with the back of a handgun. As she fell to the ground, Mrs B pressed the panic button attached to a chain around her neck, which was concealed under her blouse. The two men demanded the keys to the family safe, tied the couple up, made them lie down on the front lawn, and entered the house (the house had no alarm).

Two of the couple's neighbours arrived on the scene five minutes after Mrs B pressed her panic button. The two culprits fled into adjacent fields, firing at the couple's neighbours as they fled. The couple's neighbours returned fire, killing one suspect and injuring the other. During his interview with the arresting officer, the injured suspect revealed that a third man, posted as a lookout on the public road, had been involved in planning the attack. The third suspect worked on the couple's farm ten years before the attack. He was arrested on his employer's premises on the East Rand two weeks later, where he worked as a meat packer. The injured and the dead suspect both lived in northern KwaZulu-Natal.

The following points are worth noting in the attack on Mr and Mrs B:

- The suspects were after firearms. It appears that their primary goal was to gain access to the safe. Mr and Mrs B believe their former employee knew where the safe was and that it was used to store firearms.
- It appears the suspects knew the couple would be returning from church in the late morning.
- One suspect grew up in the Piet Retief area, but lived on the East Rand.
- The security cell system was entirely responsible for the apprehension of the first two suspects. Police investigation was responsible for the apprehension of the third suspect.

### *Attempted murder and armed robbery*

At 10h40 on a Sunday in May 1999, Mr C was returning to his farm, ten kilometres from Piet Retief, having gone to town to buy bread and milk. Mr C has a high fence around his property and a remote control electric gate. The area around the perimeter of his property was overgrown at the time. As Mr C opened his gate, six men jumped on the back of his bakkie and opened fire. Mr C sustained three gunshot wounds to his torso. The suspects dragged Mr C into the house and demanded that he open his safe. Neither Mr C, nor the suspects were able to open the safe. While the suspects were in the house, Mr C managed to crawl to the two-way radio in his bedroom and alerted his local security cell. The suspects fled in Mr C's bakkie. As they left the property, the suspects drove into the vehicle of a commando member and a neighbouring farmer who had responded to Mr C's radio signal. A gun battle ensued. Two suspects were captured, one of whom was wounded in the head. The other four fled into a neighbouring plantation. An extensive search operation, including an air search, was conducted. The four suspects were not found.

The following points are worth noting in the attack on Mr C:

- The suspects stole a vehicle and appeared to be searching for firearms.
- The suspects appeared to know Mr C's Sunday routine.
- One suspect was from the East Rand.
- The security cell system and commando patrol were responsible for the apprehension of two of the six suspects. Police investigations failed to trace the other four suspects.

### **Recurring trends in farm attacks**

Several closely related trends can be gleaned, both from the descriptions above and from anecdotal evidence about other farm attacks in the area. Firstly, the motivation for the majority of the attacks was the theft of firearms, cash or vehicles. The research team heard of no incidents where suspects appeared to be looking for anything else. Attacks were generally both well-planned and based on detailed reconnaissance and information. Attackers were both familiar with the routines of their victims and appeared to know where to find what they were looking for. It is reasonable to assume that, in general, those who attack farms in the Piet Retief area have ready access to South Africa's underground markets for stolen vehicles and firearms. They are either professionals, or, at the very least, are well acquainted with illicit firearm and vehicle markets.

To the extent that the attacks were violent, the violence appeared to be tactical and instrumental, rather than gratuitous. While the culprits appeared to have few qualms

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about injuring or even killing their victims, in the cases studied, violence was deployed either to access safes or to leave the victim incapable of signalling for help.<sup>3</sup>

Secondly, the majority of attacks appear to be committed by a combination of local people and others who came to the area to commit the robbery. At the very least, the locals constitute a source of tactical information indispensable to the successful commission of the crime. The Piet Retief district is a thoroughfare for regional migration to Gauteng. The district is awash with strangers who can settle anonymously for some time in one of the district's dense informal settlements.

However, if the research project is at all representative of farm attacks in the district, it would be a mistake to lay the blame for farm attacks entirely on people who have no connection to the area. Based on ten interviews with members of the district's traditional labour force, it appears to be common for young men who grow up on the district's farms to migrate to Gauteng, and in particular, to the East Rand to look for work. Young men typically access small, parochial and easily identifiable networks when they reach the East Rand. Most return to the Piet Retief district intermittently throughout their lives. It is reasonable to assume that some, who journey to the East Rand and fail to find work there, become involved in the area's infamous illicit economy. It would appear that this category of person – one who both knows the Piet Retief district well and is connected to Gauteng's underworld – plays a pivotal role in the commission of farm attacks in the Piet Retief district.

Finally, it would appear that the Piet Retief district's informal settlements, Phoswa Village and Mangosotho being the most prominent ones, play a significant role in the commission of farm attacks. Densely populated, unmapped, barely policed and surrounded by the thick vegetation of neighbouring timber fields, the settlements appear to provide excellent cover in the aftermath of an attack. It is also possible that shebeens (illegal taverns) and other public places in the settlements constitute areas where outsiders gather information about the district and perhaps tempt locals into their plans. Security personnel stated that both Phoswa Village and Mangosotho are home to well-organised cattle theft syndicates. Security personnel do not know whether these syndicates are also responsible for farm attacks.

Piet Retief police have reported the emergence of incipient gang activity in Phoswa Village. The settlement appears to have a large population of unemployed youths. Rape and armed robbery committed by groups of young men are, according to the local police, increasingly common in the settlement itself. It is possible that residents of the informal settlements are involved in the planning and execution of farm attacks.

## Labour relations and labour-related violence

Given the limitations of the research project, it is impossible to indicate the extent to which poor labour relations in the district are a contributing factor to farm attacks with any certainty. However, there is an endemic and severe crisis in the relationship between local farmers and traditional labour, of which the roots go back several decades.

A system of labour tenancy has been in place in the Piet Retief district since the latter part of the 19th century. Generations of small farmers have exchanged grazing land for labour with the inhabitants of Piet Retief's black settlements throughout the 20th century. According to the testimony of ten labourers employed on various farms in the area, the labour tenancy system has come under increasing strain during the last three or four decades. Some pointed to the emergence of large-scale timber farming in the area as the origin of the trouble. Farmers needed extra land for timber farming and began decreasing allocations of grazing land to workers. Others say that, with the rapid industrialisation of South Africa in the 1950s and the 1960s, young men and women in the Piet Retief district became increasingly dissatisfied with the district's wageless economy, and left for the cities to look for work. In what appears to be a host of cases, the parents of the children who left the area were evicted from the farms on which they had lived their entire lives.

Farmers, in turn, say that the increasing movement and migration of people in the district has rendered the labour tenancy system unworkable. More and more families who live on their land are not connected to the farm by their labour. Their land must be constantly policed to avoid farms "being overrun by strangers", as one farmer put it. It appears that the fragile *quid pro quo* that evolved over generations – land for labour – has been repeatedly broken by both sides during the past decades.

The district has experienced two waves of mass evictions in recent times, the first during the late 1980s, the second during the mid-1990s. Most locals tend to blame crime on outsiders. But one story is noteworthy, if only because it crops up repeatedly. Many of the families evicted in recent times, the story goes, have resettled in northern KwaZulu-Natal. These people return periodically to the Piet Retief district to attend ceremonies and to visit and bury their dead. Local labourers testify that a stock theft ring located in northern KwaZulu-Natal preys incessantly on the Piet Retief district, largely because of information provided by some of those who have been displaced from the district. There is no evidence to suggest that people evicted from the district have participated in farm attacks, but it is a possibility worth investigating.

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Many labourers have responded to the recent spate of evictions by lodging land claims under the *Land reform (labour tenancy) act*. One chief in the area said that several hundred of his subjects were planning to lodge claims. A staff member at the land affairs department in Ermelo said that he had received several hundred claims from across the Eastern Highveld during the past year (1998/99).

In the Comondale area in the Piet Retief district, about 40 farmers employ the services of a private protection agency, which ostensibly investigates cases of theft and violent crime on behalf of its clients. The agency is headed by a former South African Defence Force soldier, who employs about a dozen men who wear camouflage uniforms and patrol the area every night. Several labourers in the Comondale area maintain that the protection agency's primary function is not to investigate crime, but to harass those who are connected to the land but do not work.

Several farmers in the Piet Retief district have stated openly that they will summarily evict those who claim land on their property. It appears that the worst of the district's troubled labour relations is still to come.

### **The rural protection plan in the Piet Retief district**

#### *The commando and security cell structure*

The Piet Retief district commando, whose jurisdiction maps that of the Piet Retief police area, is divided into two companies, one rural, the other urban. In November 1999, the urban company had 51 members, the rural company 89. All 89 rural company members were white.

Among the 89 rural company members are managers and supervisors on the Sappi and Mondi plantations, as well as a handful of smallholders. Some family-owned farms have two or three commando members. While exact figures were not available at the time of writing, it would appear that, in less than one in four, but more than one in five, family-owned farms, at least one member of the household was a member of the commando.

In theory, each commando unit in the rural company maps each Mpumalanga Agricultural Union (MAU) farmers' association (boere vereeniging) – a cluster of farms linked by geographic proximity. In practice, things do not work out quite this way, mainly for two reasons. Firstly, membership of the MAU is at best sporadic. Secondly, the geographic character of farmers' associations is not always conducive to the most effective security, and in particular rapid response plans. As a result, the rural company is divided into ten sectors, which map farmers' security cells, rather than farmers' associations.

Commando personnel maintain that just under 80% of farmers in the district belong to a security cell and that the commando itself has a presence in each of the cells. The commando patrols each cell at least weekly, depending on how strong a presence it has in the particular cell. Commando patrols are never routine. Instead, they respond to crime patterns and threats, which are re-evaluated on a monthly basis. The majority of farm attacks in the Piet Retief district are executed on Sunday mornings. In mid-1999, the commando instituted a 'church patrol' each Sunday morning in each cell, usually staffed by two commando members in a single vehicle.

The members of each cell are linked to one another, as well as to commando headquarters by radio. According to commando personnel, about 75% of farms in the area have radios. Some cell members are also linked to one another by an alarm system, activated by panic buttons and by infrared sensors. When the alarm is activated, each member of the cell receives a signal, informing him which activator on which farm has triggered the signal. It was not possible to ascertain precisely how many farms in the area had alarms. Anecdotal evidence suggests that one in every two farms, at most, have an alarm system.

Each cell has developed a carefully plotted rapid response strategy. When an alarm signal or radio call is activated, neighbouring cell members drive to the farm where the signal was triggered, while the others spread themselves into a pre-arranged formation designed to block familiar exit routes. According to commando personnel, civilians are instructed not to set up roadblocks nor to confront fleeing suspects. Instead, cell members are instructed to report the movement of suspects to commando headquarters, who, in turn, are in radio contact with the Piet Retief police station. In practice, it appears that civilians do regularly engage in gun battles with fleeing suspects. In each case, cell members reported that they returned fire. Cell members invariably arrive on the scene long before the security forces.

As is apparent from the case studies above, the cell system, and in particular its radio and alarm communication system and its rapid response plan, is without question the most effective component of the rural protection plan in the Piet Retief area. In almost every case where an attack is averted or foiled, or where suspects are apprehended, the success is a direct result of the local cell's rapid response plan. Senior police management in the area openly acknowledge that, when a suspect is not apprehended within a couple of hours of the attack, the chances of making an arrest are close to zero.

### *The Mpumalanga Agricultural Union*

The Mpumalanga Agricultural Union (MAU) is a fledgling organisation and its membership constitutes a small percentage of Mpumalanga's total farming

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population. According to its own estimates, 20% of Mpumalanga farmers belong to a farmers union. Head of the MAU's security committee, Mr Kali Erichson, cites three reasons for low farm union membership in the province:

- Under the old dispensation, generous government subsidies lubricated the workings of the Transvaal Agricultural Union. Membership fees were nominal, while the union was both rich and well placed as a powerful lobby and interest group in the politics of the old dispensation. In contrast, the MAU, which broke away from the Transvaal Agricultural Union under acrimonious circumstances, was forced to begin from scratch with no infrastructure and little income. The result is that union fees have increased about ten-fold during the last ten years. Farmers argue that the new union is both more expensive and far less effective than the rich and politically influential unions of old.
- Some farmers, who still claim membership of the Transvaal Agricultural Union, refuse to join the MAU because it admits black members.
- The Transvaal Agricultural Union was a fertile recruitment ground for right-wing politics in the late 1980s and early 1990s. With the fragmentation and partial withering of organised right-wing politics under the new dispensation, agricultural union organisation has suffered as well. The central task of the MAU is to reinvent the ethos and culture of agricultural politics, to draw farmers back into union membership through corporate and economic issues, rather than through political mobilisation.

Many farmers, not just in Piet Retief but throughout the Eastern Highveld, are peripherally associated with the rural protection plan despite their non-membership of any farmers' union. Membership of the security cells described above does not entail membership of a farmers association. It requires no more than an informal security arrangement with one's neighbours, as well as a loose relationship with the local commando. Indeed, it appears that farmers in the Eastern Highveld are far more eager to organise themselves into security cells than they are to join organised agriculture in any of its formations.

Security personnel and MAU officials worry about this trend. They are concerned that informal security formations, completely detached from and unaccountable to formal security structures, could begin to mushroom throughout the Mpumalanga countryside.

### *The South African Police Service*

The Piet Retief police district is 4 000 square kilometres large, and includes within its jurisdiction a formerly white town, a black township, two large informal settlements, two timber plantations, as well as thousands of square kilometres of farmland. The

town's police station has four vehicles at its disposal, two client service vehicles that patrol Piet Retief 24 hours a day, one crime prevention vehicle and one community police vehicle, both of which patrol 40 hours per week. Given these meagre resources, the SAPS's rapid response capacity in the rural areas of the Piet Retief district is negligible. The tasks of rapid response are left primarily to the civilian members of the security cells, and secondarily to the civilians who staff the district commando.

The police station's crime intelligence office is staffed by five people, the local detective complement by 18 people. The work of local crime intelligence is consumed primarily by the collection of information on stock theft.

Farm attacks that involve murder, attempted murder or armed robbery are usually investigated by the murder and robbery squad based in Ermelo, 100 kilometres away from Piet Retief. The murder and robbery squad typically assigns two investigators to each case.

## **Weaknesses in the rural protection plan**

### *Lack of participation of farm workers*

The security cell system, and its association with the commando's sector patrols, is one of the rural protection plan's greatest strengths. In the event of a farm attack, it is *de facto* the only rapid response capacity in place. That approximately 80% of farmers in the district participate in the system adds to its strength. The security cell system has been the single most incisive capacity in the apprehension and the arrest of farm attack suspects.

However, the fact that neither the commando, nor the security cell system, has a single black member is of concern, particularly in light of the poor labour relations that characterise parts of the district. Anecdotal evidence suggests that the homes, property and livestock of farm labourers are as vulnerable to predatory crime as the lives and properties of farmers themselves. On the face of it, there is a large area of common interest between workers and farmers with regard to the prevention of crime. Farmers complain of the encroachment of predatory strangers on their land. Given high rates of stock theft, it would appear that workers also have a powerful interest in detecting and reporting the presence of strangers on farms. There can be little doubt that the recruitment of workers into the rural protection plan can significantly enhance its capacity. Its informational capacity, and in particular, the efficacy of its early warning systems, appear to suffer from the lack of worker participation.

Bringing workers into the rural protection plan, however, is fraught with difficulty. A farmer is unlikely to accept the presence in the plan of a workforce he believes is

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harbouring families who do not provide labour, and perhaps commit intermittent cattle theft. A working family, in turn, that believes it could face eviction at any moment, is unlikely to be a reliable source of information where the farmer's interests are at stake.

Bringing farmers and workers together around the issue of safety clearly involves bringing into the open a host of potentially intractable problems. Work would have to be done to restore, albeit in a modified form, the delicate *quid pro quo* that has passed down the generations. Whether this task is indeed possible remains a mute point. Black families in the area require land on which to graze their cattle, but they also require the contractual freedom to seek employment of their own accord. Farmers, in turn, are unprepared to give sections of their land to families who neither pay rent, nor provide labour in return. Formulating a common set of rules, consented to by both sides, is probably a prerequisite for large-scale worker participation in the rural protection plan.

The first and most important step in drawing workers into the plan is a process of mediation and negotiation between farmers and workers. The lack of communication between the two on the issue of land claims and evictions is striking. Workers lodge land claims without informing their employers. Some employers evict workers without notice. Clearly, a channel of communication needs to be opened before employers and workers can work together in the rural protection plan in any meaningful way. Who might play such a mediation role is difficult to pinpoint here. Much depends on the sophistication and charisma of the personalities that drive the rural protection plan itself.

Matters are made more difficult by the fact that public life among white farmers in the area, and political public life in particular, has dissipated under the new post-1994 dispensation. It appears that few farmers come together to discuss labour relations, or indeed other common concerns that might require collective thought and action. Building a more inclusive rural protection plan would seem to entail building public forums among a publicly inactive constituency.

### *Intelligence gathering and investigation*

Senior provincial police officials openly acknowledge that culprits who are not apprehended by civilians in the immediate aftermath of an attack are seldom apprehended at all. As far as reactive detection and investigation are concerned, the SAPS is thus contributing little to the rural protection plan.

The investigation of farm attacks in the Piet Retief district is a formidable task. The area is a regional thoroughfare and thus awash with strangers who can enter and

leave the district undetected. Large-scale forestry in the area makes for thick and dense terrain where culprits can take refuge. Dense, unmapped informal settlements make both for convenient cover in the aftermath of an attack and a source of information gathering and recruitment for criminals.

Nonetheless, there appear to be two areas where police work can be improved considerably:

- Station-level intelligence produces little in the way of crime profiles of the two informal settlements that border the town of Piet Retief: Mangosotho and Phoswa Village. These settlements are relatively small, their social geography presumably fairly easy to comprehend for those who live there. There is every reason to believe that their criminal networks are relatively small, and in principle, at any rate, easy to identify.

Detailed information on criminal activity in the settlements could inform several policing strategies. In terms of proactive policing, the lives of criminals could be made more difficult if the public spaces which they occupy, were known. Carefully selected illicit shebeens (illegal taverns) could be closed down. The commission of petty crimes by particular groups and networks could be targeted. Moreover, if the names and profiles of key figures in the settlement's criminal networks were known, police would begin to get a sense of the micropolitics that animate crime in the settlements.

Such information would also prove useful for reaction work. In Mrs A's case (see case studies above), once the culprits 'disappeared' into the Mangosotho settlement, investigative work came to an abrupt halt. If investigators had had access to detailed information on the nature and geography of the settlement's criminal networks, the police may have been able to search the settlement intelligently and selectively in the aftermath of the attack.

- There is a regional dimension to farm attacks in the Piet Retief district. Local people who migrate to the East Rand and return home intermittently cropped up again and again among farm attack suspects. The connection between farm attacks in the Piet Retief district and the illicit economies of Gauteng appears to be a strong one. Yet, it appears that, for the most part, both local crime intelligence, and the murder and robbery unit work in relative isolation and do not track the regional dimension of the crimes they investigate.

It is difficult to ascertain how thoroughly farm attack suspects are questioned by investigating officers. What seems clear, is that investigators do little follow-up

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work in other areas, even when it is certain that the firearms and vehicles stolen in the Piet Retief district are intended to be sold in Gauteng. It would appear that both crime intelligence and the local murder and robbery unit seldom work with their counterparts in other parts of South Africa.

It is probable that the networks in Gauteng accessed by Piet Retief migrants are small and easily identifiable. It is even more probable that the *criminal* networks accessed by a minority of Piet Retief migrants are even more discernible. Thorough questioning of suspects and comprehensive follow-up work that traces the networks in which suspects operate would greatly enhance the rural protection plan's knowledge of the underworld from which farm attacks in the district are planned. For example, the Nylstroom murder and robbery unit has, during the past two years (1998-99), arrested murder and armed robbery suspects as far afield as Port Elizabeth and Bloemfontein. It is not inconceivable that Mpumalanga investigators can similarly trace the regional ties through which attacks are planned.

## Notes

- 1 There are strong economic ties between the German community of Piet Retief and that on the East Rand. The latter is strongly associated with the meat retail sector and is, in part, supplied with beef and pork from the Piet Retief area.
- 2 Real names have been omitted to protect the confidentiality of those involved.
- 3 There was one exception. In April 1998, a visitor to a farm in the Piet Retief district was gunned down with an AK-47 rifle at the entrance of the farm he was visiting. Neither his vehicle, nor any of his possessions were stolen. Police subsequently learned that the murder was an assassination. The owner of the farm had evicted several families from his property. The murder was an act of retribution. The assassins, however, picked the wrong target. They believed that the victim was the farmer in question.