

Chapter 9 Conclusion

Comparing the rural protection plan in Piet Retief, on the one hand, and Ixopo and Greytown, on the other, provides a useful opportunity to demonstrate the repercussions when, as in Piet Retief, only one aspect of the plan is working well. The strength of the Piet Retief plan resides in the high participation of farmers in the security cell system, as well as its reliance on alarms and panic buttons rather than just radios. The result is an excellent rapid reaction system, one that has been responsible for the apprehension of suspects in a number of cases.

However, the rapid reaction capacity of the security cell system, combined with a close relationship with the commando, receives little support from other aspects of the rural protection plan. It appears that crime intelligence has insufficient capacity to play any significant role in crime prevention, or to guide investigation. Investigation itself rarely leads to the apprehension of suspects. Moreover, the rural protection plan has failed to address, or even to acknowledge, a brewing crisis in labour relations in the district. An impending wave of land claims and evictions could lead to a severe deterioration in an already volatile arena. Whether such deterioration will result in an escalation of farm attacks is open to speculation. Meaningful black participation in the rural protection plan is highly unlikely until dialogue regarding a great deal of cumulative anger and distrust is addressed.

Why the plan has failed to address the relationship between black and white communities is not clear. The political disposition of many farmers in the area may be one factor. The weakness of the Mpumalanga Agricultural Union, combined with the general decline in public activity by farmers in the region under the new dispensation is probably another factor. Nonetheless, the failure of both the SANDF and the SAPS to attempt to play a leadership role in this regard is a matter of concern.

Ixopo and Greytown, in contrast, benefit considerably from the presence of a strong provincial agricultural union, Kwanalu. For some time, the union has engaged in

formal dialogue with traditional leaders, the department of land affairs and the security forces. Ixopo and Greytown also benefit from the presence of Army Group 9, which is eager to play a mediation and conflict resolution role in the area, and which has contributed to the formulation of creative variants on the rural protection plan. That both areas are served by murder and robbery units with fairly high success rates is probably the result of sustained citizen participation in the plan.

The strength of the rural protection plan in Greytown and Ixopo is not replicated across the Midlands area. Many commandos reported that participation in the plan intensifies in the aftermath of a farm attack, but then peters out two or three months later. Why the rural protection plan was particularly strong in some parts of the Midlands and not in others is a matter that requires further investigation.

Studying Greytown and Ixopo also affords the opportunity to examine problems that remain, even when the rural protection plan is working well. In both areas, attempts to bring traditional leaders into the plan brought some success, but also showed up many of the plan's inherent limits. The crisis of poverty and social discord that beset traditional areas in the Midlands render the most sophisticated crime prevention plans very difficult to implement. Traditional leaders, in general, are on the defensive and are attempting to shore up authority, sometimes well, sometimes hopelessly, that they have held in the past. The result is that the rural protection plan often finds itself in dialogue with people who either have little control over their jurisdictions or who have little desire to see the plan work. Moreover, it is not clear whether development solutions are immediate or direct answers to the problem of land encroachment. Land encroachment is not simply a symptom of land hunger, but also of social decay. Those who encroach on commercial farm land often have little desire or capacity to cultivate the land.

While the plan was strong in both Ixopo and Greytown, its heavy reliance on the (particularly financial) commitments of civilians is worrying. In Ixopo, in particular, farmers believe that they are forced to go it alone. Some argue that the benefits of working with the security forces are becoming less apparent.

In the Wierdabrug area, the rural protection plan's success is its ability to bring together the various security agencies and to co-ordinate their responses to combat attacks on smallholdings. The plan's weakness in the area is the high degree of public apathy. Few people are aware of the plan, and only a small minority of smallholders in the area are prepared to participate in the plan. A further weakness of the plan – although this is not unique to the Wierdabrug area – is the lack of resources available to the security forces that would enable them to operate at an optimum level.

In both Piet Retief and the Midlands, many attacks had a regional dimension. Typically, a perpetrator who had grown up or spent time in the local area, but lived in a large metropolitan centre and had access to its illicit economy, would recruit locals to assist in the commission of a crime. This rural/urban interface mirrors the lives lived by many South Africans who participate in both urban and rural society. That urban perpetrators who commit farm attacks appear, in general, to have a history in the area where they commit attacks, probably makes investigative work less difficult than appears at first glance. At the very least, the regional dimension of many attacks needs to be mirrored by a regional investigative strategy. In the Wierdabrug area, many of the perpetrators of attacks had some link to the smallholding they attacked. Frequently, the perpetrators had worked on the smallholding they attacked in the past, or knew an employee or former employee of the smallholder whose smallholding they attacked.

The motivation for the majority of the attacks researched was the theft of firearms, cash or vehicles. Attacks were, in general, both well-planned and based on detailed reconnaissance and information. Most 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 and smallholdings have ready access to South Africa's underground markets for stolen vehicles and firearms.

To the extent that the attacks were violent, the violence generally appeared to be tactical and instrumental, rather than gratuitous. While the culprits appeared to have few qualms about injuring or even killing their victims, violence was deployed in the cases studied either to access safes, to leave the victim incapable of signalling for help, or to overpower the victim.