

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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In February 2003, President Thabo Mbeki announced that the South African National Defence Force's (SANDF) Territorial Reserve, popularly known as the Commandos, would be phased out. This phasing out process is now well underway. By the end of 2009, the last of South Africa's 183 Commandos will have ceased operating, their rural crime prevention and borderline control functions taken over by the South African Police Service (SAPS).

The task of this monograph is to assess the rural safety capacity that will be lost with the closing of the Commandos, and to discuss the manner in which the SAPS will replace that capacity. To this end, we conducted fieldwork in the three Commando jurisdictions: Ladybrand in the eastern Free State, De Mist in Eastern Cape, and West Rand and Gatsrand Commando areas in Gauteng.

Commando strength is uneven. In Ladybrand, for instance, commercial farmers are actively involved in a number of grassroots security initiatives, primarily in defence of their commercial property, but the Commando is a marginal player in these initiatives. Moreover, the farming community is deeply divided over how the borderline with Lesotho ought to be policed, and, by proxy, over the role the Commando ought to play in borderline control.

The De Mist Commando in Eastern Cape, by contrast, is highly organised, has a large active membership, and a clear and uncontested rural crime prevention programme. It is the dominant player in rural crime prevention; most police stations in its jurisdiction invest the lion's share of their resources in urban policing. In the West Rand, there is a strong identification between white farmers and the Commando, primarily as a result of the Commando's competence in policing agricultural crimes.

We ask whether the Commandos are representative of rural South Africa, and argue that they are not; their function is primarily to protect the property and interests of the rural middle class. This is not necessarily illegitimate. Rural South Africa is deeply divided, by race, by inequality, and by a great deal of history. Asking a security agency to bridge these divides is asking too much;

security agencies can neither mend souls nor conduct projects of social engineering. A more pertinent question to ask is whether the Commandos can make an effective contribution to policing agricultural crimes while not invading the privacy and violating the dignity of other rural constituencies. We argue that when deployed inappropriately, Commandos can indeed be destructive of social harmony and wellbeing, but that when deployed correctly they are both effective and benign.

Finally, we argue that the policing of agricultural crimes, and of the rural sectors of small town police stations more generally, is likely to deteriorate after the closure of the Commandos. However, we do not pretend to offer easy solutions to the problem. The matter is by its nature a difficult one.

All police services exercise discretion in deciding which aspects of policing to prioritise. In the SAPS, this discretion is exercised primarily at a national level. Area and station level managers are given quantifiable crime reduction and police action targets to meet. At present, the highest priority crimes in the SAPS are contact crimes, and are attached to an annual crime reduction target of seven percent. This is a normative, value-laden decision, and a commendable one at that. In small town police stations, however, the policing of rural sectors will suffer as a result. Many of these stations straddle a sharp divide between urban and rural areas. Most contact crimes are committed in urban sectors. If and when the capacity contained in the Commandos is transferred to the police, area and station level managers are bound to transfer much of this capacity from the rural sectors in which it is now deployed to urban sectors. Not to do so would be to respond irrationally to their own performance indicators.

Prioritising the policing of, say, aggravated robbery over sheep theft is not just understandable but commendable. The SAPS should be aware though that there are places where its existing organisational incentives might, unless checked, result in situations where agricultural crimes are almost entirely unpoliced.