

INTRODUCTION

In his State of the Nation address at the opening of Parliament in February 2003, President Thabo Mbeki announced that the SANDF's Territorial Reserve, popularly known as the Commandos, would be phased out. Mbeki said in his address that:

Measures will be taken to ensure that the structures meant to support the security agencies, such as the Commandos ... are properly regulated to do what they were set up for. In this regard, in order to ensure security for all in the rural areas, including the farmers, government will start in the near future to phase out the SANDF Commandos, at the same time as we create in their place a new system whose composition and ethos accord with the requirements of all rural communities.¹

At time of writing, two and a half years after this announcement was made, the implementation of Mbeki's directive is well underway. Seventeen of the SANDF's 183 Commandos had ceased operations by the end of February 2005; the figure will have increased to 70 by February 2006. It is envisaged that the last of the Commandos will have shut down by the end of the 2009 financial year. The rural safety and security functions they have played will have been taken over by the SAPS in two institutional forms: first, in the establishment of sector policing structures in police stations throughout the South African hinterland; and second, in the formation of Area Crime Combating Units (ACCUs) across the country, which will have rapid response and high density policing, and border control capabilities.

The aim of this research study is to assess the nature of the rural safety capacity that will be lost with the closing of the Commandos, and to discuss the options the SAPS has in regard to replacing that capacity. We travelled to three Commando areas in South Africa where Commando units are still active: the Ladybrand Commando area on the border between Free State province and Lesotho; the De Mist Commando area in the Eastern Cape; and the Westrand and Gatsrand Commando areas in Johannesburg's West Rand. It is from this sample that we drew our conclusions about the rural safety role Commandos play and what rural safety may look like once they have gone.

The announcement that the Commandos are to be phased out has elicited a great deal of controversy. This is hardly surprising. Any debate about the Commandos must inevitably find itself tackling the charged and difficult question of the relationship between security and race. At one end of the spectrum, government has been accused of leaving isolated white families of the agricultural hinterland vulnerable to violent crime. At the other, it has been lauded for closing down a quasi-private militia sensitive to white farmers' security but insensitive to black citizens' rights. Judging from our interviews with role players and ordinary citizens alike in the three districts we visited, the controversy has not abated.

In what follows we attempt, not to skirt this controversy, but to approach it from a clear and simple perspective. We go back to basics and ask, in the abstract, what it is that security agencies do to reduce crime, and more, specifically, what rural security agencies do to reduce crime in rural areas. We examine the work of the Commandos from this perspective, and conclude that their contribution to rural safety is far more limited than their supporters allow, but far more valuable than their detractors are prepared to acknowledge.

We go on to argue that policing rural South Africa is not only hard, but demands particularly difficult choices. Rural South Africa is characterised by deep social division; different rural constituencies have different, sometimes conflicting, safety needs. The result is there is sometimes a zero-sum relationship between different communities in regard to what they need from local and regional security agencies. The more resources given to the security needs of a rural informal settlement, for instance, the less there are available for security needs of commercial farmers, and visa versa. Rural policing, in other words, is best understood as a cake to be cut into discrete slices.

How to divide this cake is a tough question. It is a matter of police discretion, and there are many rival ways, all reasonable, of exercising this discretion. As things stand, the SAPS is using its discretion to distribute policing services away from agricultural districts and into rural towns. The transfer of capacity from the Commandos to the police is thus likely to result in the deterioration of the policing of agricultural crimes.