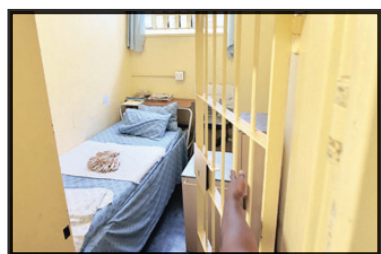




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WEDNESDAY DECEMBER 2 2015

Established October 17 1887

R7,90 inc VAT

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RED ANTS SHOT DOWN



FILTHY: Rubbish piles up in the CBD as the Pikitup strike continues. Inset: Last week Pikitup hired the Red Ants to clean the inner city. A shooting incident has left three workers critically injured. MAIN PICTURE: DUMISANI DUBE

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MEMBERS of the Red Ants clearing up rubbish during the Pikitup strike said they were shot by attackers, but police say they were mistakenly shot by their own colleague.

By this morning there were two very different versions of the shooting incident in the Joburg CBD that left three Red Ants workers critically injured.

The shooting happened on Klein Street near the Wanderers Street taxi rank, while Red Ants workers were cleaning the inner city. They were hired by Pikitup to collect rubbish during the utility workers'

ongoing strike.

Initial reports were that the shooting happened yesterday but now police say it was on Monday night.

Johannesburg Central police station spokesman Warrant Officer Xoli Mbele told The Star that Red Ants workers were approached and surrounded by a group of people.

"A Red Ants member then grabbed the gun of a security personnel who was with them and opened fire. He was shooting at everyone and injured several members of the Red

Ants," Mbele said.

He confirmed that police had the firearm that was apparently used and that it belonged to the security guard.

No arrests have been made.

"A case of attempted murder has been opened and we are still investigating the circumstances surrounding this. The details are still sketchy."

However, according to Red Ants owner Johan Bosch, that's not what happened.

"A Red Ants clean-up crew was busy cleaning the streets when they were surrounded

by several people. One opened fire hitting three of our guys in the chest and a fourth in the shoulder," said Bosch.

Bosch said the Red Ants member injured in the shoulder managed to overpower and disarm the gunman but sustained the injury during the struggle for the firearm.

"We do have security guards protecting them; but the crew was taken by surprise."

He said they were however willing to bring in another 15 000 security guards to protect the cleaning crews.

Despite the incident, the Red Ants are determined to carry on cleaning the streets.

"It's a sad thing when people resort to violence when they're trying to enforce their point of view. We're trying to assist the city and in doing so, have been attacked, but we won't let this stop us... That's the advantage of the Red Ants, we don't run away from the problem, we deal with it," Bosch said.

"We've always had attacks during clean-ups like this over the years and we try to avoid armed altercations because it

leads to death; that's why Red Ants only carry rubber bullets."

The SA Municipal Workers Union (Samwu) national spokesman Papikie Mohale said this morning the union had distanced itself from the allegations that it was Samwu or Pikitup workers who were involved in the shooting.

"Our workers do not carry guns, they're cleaners. We deny that they did any shooting."

Red Ants chief operating officer Fuzile Balintulo said last night that he was unsure who the gunman was.

"We cannot point fingers, but at this stage, it appears it was likely to be a group of disgruntled Pikitup workers who did not like to see us cleaning the inner city."

Pikitup employees have been striking for the past week.



'I AM WELL': An October 20 video given to Gift of the Givers shows that Stephen McGown, who is being held captive in Mali, is alive. PICTURE: YOUTUBE

Proof of life on Mali hostages

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THE LONG-AWAITED proof-of-life videos of the two hostages held in Mali for the past four years were handed over to aid organisation Gift of the Givers yesterday.

"My wife and my family, I am well. I hope you all are well back home. I understand that I may be seeing you soon," said South African hostage Stephen McGown in one video.

McGown and Swede Johan Gustafsson were kidnapped in Timbuktu by al-Qaeda militants four years ago.

There had been no confirmation that the men were still alive and Gift of the Givers - recently brought in to try to negotiate their release - last week managed to make contact with the captors. They were promised the videos, but these were not delivered.

Yesterday hope was restored when Gift of the Givers obtained videos of the men in good health. The videos are apparently dated October 20.

"Given our interactions

over the last few weeks and the content of the video, that date is absolutely credible and realistic," said Gift of the Givers chairman Dr Imtiaz Sooliman.

The footage, which has since been posted on YouTube, shows the men engaged with the promise of release.

Gift of the Givers agreed to assist the McGown family in securing Stephen's release and began establishing contact at the beginning of the year. It sent Mali negotiator Mohamed Yehia Dicko there in July.

Last week, the organisation received a call from al-Qaeda for them to come and get the videos of the hostages. Dicko arrived in Bamako on the anniversary of the hostages' capture last Wednesday and has since been working to obtain proof of life.

After several days of stalling, the captors kept their promise and released the videos to Gift of the Givers.

In a 42-second video, McGown, with a long beard tinged with grey, appears on screen where he thanks the South African government and Gift of the Givers for their role in negotiating his release.

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