

Justice blinded by gun smoke

Leaders' shoot-to-kill talk getting vigilantes all fired up

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Justice Malala: It has been three weeks since Olga Kekana was murdered by police in Mabopane, just north of Pretoria. She was killed under the pretext that the police have to shoot first and ask questions later because they are protecting citizens from criminals.

Kekana's death is a harbinger of what is to come under the administration of President Jacob Zuma.

Kekana was shot in the head when the car in which she was travelling with three friends was mistaken by police for one stolen by hijackers. The police claim that they flashed their blue lights and sounded sirens.

The three survivors deny this. They say the police started shooting immediately they flashed their blue lights. Eight policemen opened fire with R5s and 9mm pistols. The car had 13 bullet holes. The police fled the scene instantly and did not help the injured. They are still on duty.

In the period before and after Kekana's death, there had been a lot of rhetoric from political leaders about guns and killing. Zuma continues today to sing at rallies: "Bring me my machine gun".

Zuma was the first to rush to support former deputy safety and security minister Susan Shabangu's call for police to "shoot to kill" alleged criminals. She said: "You must kill the bastards if they threaten you or the community. I want no warning shots. You have one shot and it must be a kill shot."

The language of violence, of the police being given a licence to kill Olga Kekana, has since come to be part of our lives. Zuma, Police Minister Nathi Mthethwa, Deputy Police Minister Fikile Mbalula and national police commissioner Bheki Cele have repeatedly made it clear that officers will receive their backing for shooting first and asking questions later.

Our police leaders might try to squirm out of this, but the truth is that Kekana's blood was spilt because of their irresponsible utterances, and because they used us - the citizenry - to justify these actions.

War talk is on the increase among political - and particularly ANC - leaders. It is hard to distinguish between the ANC leaders of today and the blood-thirsty Inkatha Freedom Party leaders of the late 1980s and early 1990s. The language of violence, the urge to show

physical force rather than intellectual prowess, has become the calling card of the ANC, from the party president to the youth leader.

It started with Julius Malema's assertion that he will "kill for Zuma", the support he received from the likes of Zwelinzima Vavi for this, and now the continued use of violent language by leaders of the ruling party. The MK Veterans' Association recently told Kader Asmal to go and die, and the ANC Youth League's Free State chairman said Jonathan Jansen should be shot and killed.

The problem with these outbursts is that people on the ground are increasingly beginning to believe that it is justifiable to take the law into their own hands. They believe that if killing is justified for the police, it is justified for them too.

According to Future Fact surveys (Future Fact picked up in 2007 that xenophobia was on the rise and would "tip over", as it did last year), there are now signs that vigilantism based on this war talk is on the rise.

Surveys by Future Fact show that many South Africans are losing faith in the police and believe it is acceptable to take the law into their own hands. Future Fact 2008 shows that 56% of South Africans say that if the police and the government do nothing about crime, ordinary people have the right to take the law into their own hands.

Add to that that 77% of people are afraid and alert all the time in case they become a victim of crime, and that 72% (in 2007) believe criminals have more rights than victims, and the stage is set for something very scary.

You can see that something in the pages of the Sunday Sun almost every week - the spectre of vigilantism, of people taking the law into their own hands and appointing themselves judge, jury and executioner.

And who can blame them? Our leaders' rhetoric has made it acceptable to "kill", and our police have been granted a licence to carry out "extra-judicial" killings, so why can't ordinary people be allowed to dispense justice in a similar way?

President Zuma and his Cabinet are responsible for Olga Kekana - and for the many who will now be judged and killed by vigilantes.