

MEDIA RELEASE

Minister of Police outlines status of war on crime at POPCRU 10th National Congress

07 November 2023: Despite commending the success of police's Operation Shanela, Minister of Police Bheki Cele has warned delegates representing the country's police, traffic, and correctional services that criminals have declared war on South Africa, and outlined a number of systemic and legislative changes needed to better support law enforcement.

Speaking on the second day of the 10th National Congress of the Police and Prisons Civil Rights Union (POPCRU) in Durban, Cele first commended POPCRU's leadership for building a strong and highly respected organisation that represents workers within the criminal justice system.

He then pointed to the achievements of Operation Shanela as an example of the successes of the work of the South African Police Service (SAPS) and POPCRU members in the fight against crime.

Launched on 08 May this year, Operation Shanela aims to disrupt criminal activities through high-visibility police operations in hotspot areas. As a result of this strategy, SAPS has arrested 213,059 individuals to date, of whom 95,000 were the subjects of outstanding warrants for serious crimes.

However, ahead of the release of the latest quarterly crime statistics scheduled for next week, Cele emphasised that crime had reached "unacceptable" levels in South Africa, as an average of over 9,000 women are raped every three months, and another 6,000 individuals murdered.

He further pointed to the recent robbery of Minister of Transport Sindisiwe Chikunga on the highway between Vosloorus and Heidelberg as an example of increasingly brazen criminal behaviour.

"The war has been declared by criminals, but when you fight a war, you don't ask who started it. You get on with it, and when the dust settles, you ask questions," he said.

Police therefore need greater legal protections in the execution of their duties as they seek to protect and defend communities. "When police are shot at and they respond, it's a must that they must win. They are the last buffer between a stable and safe community, and criminality," he argued.

"One of the most important human rights is life itself. It's important that lives, including the lives of police, remain a human right that is defended at all costs. The call to say that police can't die with their guns in their hand is the correct call."

Further interventions needed to stem rising crime levels

The fight against crime is not the sole responsibility of law enforcement – early intervention and education also play a critical role in addressing the root causes of crime.

For example, the Department of Basic Education must work to ensure that children attend their classes and complete their schooling to prevent them from falling into gangs, said Cele.

“If there is no early intervention from early childhood, and basic education, we will be throwing our kids into criminality. Early intervention must be done beyond the work of law enforcement agencies.”

Another issue is the lack of infrastructure such as roads in certain areas, which prevents police from being able to quickly locate and attend crime scenes.

He added that while President Ramaphosa’s administration had made significant strides in employing more police members, the ratio of police officers to the population has fallen significantly since 2010, when there was one officer for every 222 people, to one officer for every 413 people today.

Finally, the criminal system is skewed in favour of criminals. “Prisoners attend the best medical facilities, and they are able to study and get their PhDs. The system is more understanding and sympathetic to criminals than to victims or their families,” he criticised.

POPCRU President Dr Zizamele Cebekhulu-Makhaza agreed with this point, adding that deficiencies in the Criminal Procedure Act of 1977 are preventing police from performing their work, while supporting perpetrators.

“This is an issue that we discussed at the recent Policing Indaba. For example, if a police officer arrests a man who committed a crime involving the abuse of a woman, on arrival at court, this man will be standing with a lawyer provided by the state who will defend him. Meanwhile, the policeman will be asked to stand on the side of the victim, even without training in presenting evidence in court.

“Minister, this is a situation that needs to change,” he concluded.

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