

Mbeki Puts On Thinking Cap To Wrestle With Crime

Written by Ilana Mercer

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My apologies; I've misled readers about my native South Africa. I called it the most violent place on earth outside a war zone. I was wrong. BBC World recently—and reluctantly—disclosed that South Africa jostles with Iraq and Colombia for the title of most violent country in the world, war zones included.

In a short segment, correspondent John Simpson reported that in South Africa, on average, 50 people are murdered every day (population: 47 million), 3 times that number are raped; and 300 are violently attacked and robbed daily. And these are the official, likely filtered, figures. They say nothing about the seldom-reported, hundreds of muggings carried out in broad daylight and captured by security cameras. According to Robert McCafferty of the United Christian Action, moreover, the South African Medical Research Council tallies 89 daily deaths; Interpol's statistics are double those released by the police—a bent and brutal outfit whose chief has been linked to the mafia but has yet to be suspended.

When my family and I presciently left South Africa in 1995, it was still a country with a space program (on which my husband worked), “gleaming skyscrapers,” and department stores that rivaled Macy's. The Central Business District in Johannesburg bustled. Crime was well controlled. When mobs stoned cars en route to the DF Malan Airport in Cape-Town (geographical names across the country have since been changed to expunge Afrikaans history), a tough and competent police force sprung into action. An equally impressive Western system of Roman-Dutch law dished out just deserts in response to “muti-murder” (ritual killing) or “necklacing” (placing a car tire around a putative offender's neck and igniting it with gasoline).

A decade hence, the city of Johannesburg, renamed Egoli, looks like Mogadishu—streets strewn with garbage, many spectacular skyscrapers overrun by squatters, vandalized, or boarded up with brick by desperate owners. The five-star Carlton Hotel closed in 1997. The safety of its guests could no longer be guaranteed. Ditto other landmarks such as the Great Synagogue and the green glass Garden Court Hotel.

The specter is repeated across South Africa. Gun battles are commonplace on city streets. Shopkeepers often sit behind iron bars. Stories abound of soccer moms and dads being robbed during a game. As the Christian Science Monitor's South African correspondent put it, “Nothing says ‘Home Sweet Home’ like 10-foot walls, electric fencing, burglar bars, and at least one panic button wired directly to an armed-response team.” Recent prominent victims of criminals include Nobel Prize-winning author Nadine Gordimer, assaulted in her Johannesburg home, and Anglo-Zulu War historian David Rattray, murdered in his Northern-Natal lodge.

So, to spare myself a future mea culpa, be advised that the BBC's crime statistics were, in all

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likelihood, obtained from the police who've been less than frank about the scope of the carnage. Malfeasance, graft and corruption are all in a day's work for a force hollowed out by affirmative action. If you object to this unflattering characterization observe them in action on YouTube. The BBC has filmed a fairly typical crime-scene intervention during which the police "think about" arresting a man who had stabbed another in the face, but ... "change their minds. He is allowed back on the streets again."

"Think," of course, is the wrong word—especially when it comes to the brain trust of the ruling African National Congress. President Thabo Mbeki ignored the BBC's otherwise incontinent exhilaration about everything else South-African, choosing instead to frame as racism the network's newfound realism vis-à-vis crime. Mbeki wields this ad hominem like an assegai. He is, however, much less adept at logic.

"Nobody can show that the overwhelming majority of the 40-50 million South Africans think that crime is out of control. Nobody can, because it's not true," he admonished. Thabo "thinks" truth is decided by majority vote; Thabo "thinks" that if he could get a representative sample of South Africans to agree crime was insignificant, then that would settle the matter.

It so happens that South Africans are fed up ("gatvol" in Afrikaans) with crime. Why else would communities across the country be staging marches in protest? The futile purpose of these events is to present Mbeki with a petition. The premise for such folly being that the ruling kleptocrats are not only competent, but well intentioned and caring too. Thabo will take note, mind you, if the once-mighty Afrikaners take to the streets with their weapons, not with petitions and scented candles.

Mbeki's ministers share his oil-and-water relationship to the truth. One of them told itvNEWS that when adjusted for population, levels of crime in the Unites States approximate those of South Africa. Lies. Going by the underreported, police crime numbers, the murder rate in South Africa is 10 times worse than the US. According to the MRC figures, it's 14 times worse.

At least the Safety and Security Minister is honest; he doesn't conceal his racial hostility. "Only whites complain," he smirked, adding that "they can continue to whinge until they are blue in the face, or they can simply leave this country."

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