

Taxi operators force their way into union buildings

Written by Sapa

Wednesday, 21 April 2010 20:59 -



Chaos broke out on Wednesday as members of the National Taxi Alliance (NTA) forced their way into the main entrance of the Union Buildings in Pretoria. Pleas by NTA leaders fell on deaf ears as members brandishing branches and knobkieries overpowered police. "They must let us in, we came here together," a protesting taxi driver shouted.

The NTA leadership was supposed to hand over a memorandum of grievances to the head of security in the department of transport, while protesting taxi drivers and operators waited outside to be briefed. However, protesters overpowered police at the main gate, then headed for a second gate just metres away from the Union Buildings. Police quickly blocked access, as taxi drivers shouted, cursed and pushed, while demanding that they be let in. Some climbed a nearby tree. Many of the protesters appeared drunk and some reeked of alcohol.

A policeman who was involved in a heated argument with a group trying to force its way past the barricade, was warned: "Shoot and you will regret it." "He mustn't point a gun at us," yelled a man. The visibly infuriated policeman was told to calm down by his colleagues, who seemed to be struggling to maintain peace. NTA chairman Francis Masitsa called for calm. "Please show South Africans we are disciplined," he said.

The NTA was accusing the government of ill-treating taxi operators and drivers while it was concerned about the bus rapid transit system, their exclusion from 2010 World Cup plans and the taxi recapitalisation programme.

Earlier, vendors closed their shops as thousands of taxi operators moved along Vermeulen street in the Pretoria city centre to deliver the memorandum to the Union Buildings. Most streets in the Pretoria CBD were closed on Wednesday morning and commuters were left stranded. Taxi operators from various provinces had gathered at Schubart Park at 9am. They were escorted by police and sang struggle songs and carried placards, including one reading: "Why are taxis the main target to our government?"

Tshwane Metro police spokeswoman Alta Fourie denied reports that some taxi drivers and passengers were assaulted and that a taxi was burnt on Bloed street. Protesters thought to belong to the NTA earlier threw refuse on Vermeulen street, but it was later discovered they

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were members of the striking SA Municipal Workers' Union on their way to Tshwane's municipal offices. Protesters had also swarmed around a police vehicle on Lynnwood road and threw rocks, breaking its back window, said Sergeant Lynette Erasmus. A taxi was seen speeding away from the scene, she said.