

# THE THREE MILLION GANG IN MAOKENG TOWNSHIP (KROONSTAD) AND THE REACTION OF THE AFRICAN NATIONAL CONGRESS'S ALIGNED STRUCTURES

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## ***Abstract***

As early as 1989 when it was clear that there was a possibility of unbanning liberation movements in South Africa and securing the release of political prisoners, the African National Congress (ANC)-aligned structures in the different townships began openly and radically mobilising for the organisation. The ANC-aligned demonstrations and protests became everyday scenes around the country and it was evident that the South African Police (SAP) was gradually battling to control the ANC-aligned citizens in most townships. In mid-1989, a gang known as the Three Million emerged in Maokeng Township (Kroonstad) and was accused by the community members to be operating as a vigilante group. Therefore, incidents of vigilantism by the Three Million Gang became a regular scene in this township. Using the Three Million as a case in point, I attempted to show how the ANC-aligned structures reacted to this gang which was viewed as a vigilante group in the Maokeng Township.

**Keywords:** African National Congress; Three Million Gang; Vigilantism; Township; African National Congress Youth League, Free State Province, Maokeng, Seeisoville.

## **Introduction**

The article traces the formation of a vigilante group known as the Three Million in Maokeng Township during the late 1980s and early 1990s and relates its existence to the overall discourse of vigilantism in South Africa over the same period of time. The article begins with a brief outline and development of the Three Million Gang during the period under discussion. The activities of the Three Million Gang during this period are then contrasted to the ANC-

aligned aboveground structures during significant political changes in South Africa. Although the article focuses on the Maokeng Township; however, it should be noted that the issue of gangsterism and vigilantism was not only particular to this township. In the late 1980s many townships of the Free State experienced the same activities.<sup>1</sup> For example, in Thabong (Welkom) there was The Phakathis and in Parys, the A-Team. Pockets of vigilante groups also existed in the 1990s around the country. One notable group was the *Mapogo a Mathamaga* in the Sekhukhune area.<sup>2</sup> Another one was the People Against Gangsterism and Drugs (PAGAD) in Cape Town.<sup>3</sup> In the former homeland of Qwaqwa, there were *AmaDlamini* and *Ntshumentshu* vigilante groups.

From a scholarly perspective, vigilante activities have received attention from researchers. Written sources were produced in attempts to highlight the impact of the vigilante groups in South Africa prior to and after the taking over of government by the ANC in 1994.<sup>4</sup> Despite the above, few attempts have been made to document the role played by the Three Million Gang in Maokeng Township and the conflicts that existed between this group and the ANC-aligned structures, such as the Self Defence Units (SDUs) and the African National Congress Youth League (ANCYL). In most cases, to some of the sources on vigilantism, reference is made in passing about the Three Million Gang in justifying other events which took place somewhere else in the Free State Province. In this article, I opine that there is a lacuna in attempts by historians and political scientists alike to widely document the struggle history of the Maokeng communities in tackling the problem of vigilantism and the existence of the Three Million Gang. Furthermore, the article highlights the strategies used by the ANC-aligned structures in Maokeng Township to curb what was viewed as a challenge to the ANC's mobilisation attempts in the area.

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- 1 T Moloi, "Political Mobilisation in Maokeng Township, Kroonstad, 1980s", *Paper presented at the 'Local Histories and Present Realities'*, Seminar, University of the Witwatersrand, 25 February 2009; C Twala & J Seekings, "Activist networks and political protest in the Free State, 1983-1990", *The Road to Democracy in South Africa*, 4, (1980-1990), Part 1, (Pretoria, 2010), pp. 788-794.
  - 2 For more information on this group see B Oomen, "Vigilantism or Alternative citizenship? The rise of *Mapogo a Mathamaga*", *African Studies*, 63(2), December 2004, pp. 153-171; B Oomen, "Vigilante justice in perspective: The case of Mapogo a Mathamaga", *Acta Criminologica: South African Journal of Criminology*, 12(3), 1999, pp. 45-53.
  - 3 For more information on PAGAD see CJB le Roux, "People Against Gangsterism and Drugs (Pagad)", *Journal for Contemporary History*, 22(1), June 1997, pp. 51-80; S Bangstad, "Hydra's Heads: PAGAD and Responses to the PAGAD phenomenon in a Cape Muslim Community", *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 31(1), March 2005, pp. 187-208.
  - 4 N Haysom, "Vigilantes: A contemporary form of repression", *Paper presented at the Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation*, Seminar No. 4, 25 May 1989; L Buur & S Jensen, "Introduction: Vigilantism and the policing of everyday life in South Africa", *African Studies*, 63(2), December 2004, pp. 139-152; C Charney, "Vigilantes, Clientism, and the South African State", *Transformation*, 16, 1991, pp. 1-24.

Furthermore, the article shows that newspaper reporting of what was happening in Maokeng Township during the period under discussion was biased and in favour of the then ruling National Party (NP) government in South Africa which was viewed by the ANC-aligned structures as financially supportive of groups such as the Three Million Gang in order to destabilise the organisation's mobilisation attempts in the area. Without doubt, for the Maokeng residents, the vigilante phenomenon became the most terrifying manifestation of a conflict-ridden society.

For lack of academic scrutiny, one of South Africa's vigilante organisations such as the above could well go down in history as a brutal and undisciplined gang. The article seeks to explain how this gang became a potent force in Maokeng Township, the area in which it originated. Such an explanation, I argue, had to be grounded firmly in local political dynamics, which in the case of Maokeng, was not only shaped by attacks from the ANC-aligned structures, but also by a severely discredited police force. The article thus focuses on the Three Million Gang's rise to popularity in only one particular area. I argue that this gang's general rise to power cannot be understood without taking into account the way in which the organisation managed to hook onto local political dynamics and struggles. After providing a brief sociology of this group and its rise to popularity in Maokeng Township, I will demonstrate how it became a powerful bloc, rallying the anti-ANC youth on the basis of a political discourse on difference.

In the course of analysis, the article shows that the challenges posed by the Three Million Gang to the ANC-aligned structures, had an impact on the organisation over the period under investigation. In the process, the analysis for the first time, provides some possible answers to a question that has confronted many political analysts and scholars of history in South Africa; namely, the ambivalent manner in which the ANC and its alliance partners dealt with the Three Million Gang in Maokeng Township. The article concludes by arguing that this ambivalent treatment of the Three Million Gang by the ANC-aligned structures was deeply rooted in its way of dealing with those who were opposed to it.

Furthermore, the article highlights individuals' personal experiences in dealing with vigilantism in Maokeng. Research for this article was carried out in different stages, which included collecting and analysing newspaper clippings on the topic. An analysis of the newspaper clippings helped to understand and interpret how the print media reported on the activities of

the Three Million Gang in Maokeng Township. Additionally, a number of secondary sources were consulted to form the basis of the article. From the secondary sources, no actual study has focused specifically on the vigilante groups in Maokeng Township. The researcher acted as a data collection tool and individual, in-depth interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs) were used. Individual interviews were conducted with the following groups: members of the community who witnessed the impact of vigilantism in the area and organised members of the ANC-aligned structures in Maokeng Township who countered the vigilante activities of the Three Million. For the focus group discussions inclusion criteria comprised the following: families of the victims of vigilantism in Maokeng Township, as well as members of other political organisations in the township which were not aligned to the ANC.

The absence of major sources dealing with the Three Million as a vigilante group reinforced the idea that it was both useful and relevant to deal with in order to reach a better understanding of its impact on the mobilisation strategies that the ANC-aligned structures embarked upon in the area. In order to understand the Three Million as a vigilante group and its impact, the background to the whole question of vigilantism needs scrutiny. Using an analytic and interpretive framework, the article identifies vigilantism as exposed by the Three Million as a threat to the mobilisation attempts by the ANC after its unbanning in February 1990.

### **A brief description of the vigilante phenomenon in the Free State and elsewhere in South Africa**

A theoretical framework for the phenomenon of vigilantism has been identified through the research of contextual, conceptual frameworks on political decay of which vigilantism is a feature. A common denominator that has been identified in all the specific and contextual, conceptual framework supports was that the activities of the Three Million Gang exposed vigilantism acts and that was due to political decay in South Africa. Political decay is described by Andre Duvenhage as negative political change and is associated with an inability of the state to provide law and order, stability, security and good governance to all its citizens.<sup>5</sup> The reason for this deduction was that its occurrence was always explained on the basis of a lack of law and order, a weak government, an inability of the state to provide security and social

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<sup>5</sup> A Duvenhage, "Politieke verval as 'n patron van politieke verandering: 'n teoreties – verkennende perspektief", *Journal for Contemporary History*, 28(3), December 2003, p. 44.

needs.<sup>6</sup>

It should be noted that the term ‘vigilante’ or ‘mabangalala’ has come to have a distinctly menacing meaning in South Africa. It is mainly associated with potentially murderous gangs, intent on intimidating, injuring or killing anti-apartheid activists. In most cases, vigilante groups were widely believed to enjoy police support. In the townships, the vigilantes enjoyed overt state sponsorship. In fact, vigilante violence, once initiated, became a self-generating cycle of attacks and retaliation.<sup>7</sup> Consequently, these groups operated against ANC-aligned organisations in Free State townships. Therefore, the existence of vigilante groups or gangs led to spiralling violence in the province, particularly in places like Maokeng Township.

Without doubt, the release of the ANC and United Democratic Front’s (UDF’s) leadership from prison at the end of 1989, which was followed rapidly by the unbanning of the ANC and South African Communist Party (SACP) in February 1990, the return of exiles, and the suspension of the armed struggle by Umkhonto WeSizwe (MK) in terms of the Pretoria Minute of August 1990, brought problems for the above-mentioned organisations as they continued to be infiltrated. Therefore, while the transitional years from 1990 to 1994 continued, there were violent actions around the country.<sup>8</sup> Kroonstad was one such place where violence erupted due to the existence of the Three Million as a vigilante group.

### **The origins of the Three Million Gang**

Tebello Jacob ‘Blackie’ Tumisi, a political activist in Maokeng Township argues that vigilante groups and gansterism in the area did not start with the

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6 MP Swanepoel, et al. “Vigilantism: A theoretical perspective as applied to people’s courts in post-1994 South Africa”, *Journal for Contemporary History*, 36(1), June 2011, pp. 117-118; MP Swanepoel & A Duvenhage, “Vigilantism as a feature of political decay in the post-1994 South African dispensation”, *Acta Academica*, 39(1), April 2007, 145.

7 N Haysom, *Mabangalala: The rise of right-wing vigilantes in South Africa* (Johannesburg, 1986), pp. 2; N Haysom, “The Total Strategy: The South African Security Forces and the Suppression of Civil Liberties”, in J Dugard, *The Last Years of Apartheid: Civil liberties in South Africa* (New York, 1992), pp. 80-81; C Twala, “The emergence of the student and youth resistance organisations in the Free State townships during the 1980s: A viable attempt to reorganise protest politics?”, *Journal for Contemporary History*, 32(2), December 2007, pp. 46-47; L Fourchard, “The politics of mobilisation for security in South African Townships”, *Africa Affairs*, 110(441), 2011, pp. 607-627; B Harris, “As for violent crime that’s our daily bread: Vigilante violence during South Africa’s period of transition”, *Violence and Transition Series*, 1, May 2001; A Kempen, “Vigilantism: A question of jungle justice because of a lack of justice?”, *Servamus*, 92(10), 1999, p. 8.

8 For more information see S Ellis, “The historical significance of South Africa’s Third Force”, *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 24(2), June 1998, pp. 261-299; E Bornman, et al., *Violence in South Africa: A variety of perspectives*, (Pretoria, 1998), pp. 1-13.

existence of the Three Million. He recalls the following about gangsterism in the area:

*Gangsterism in Kroonstad started a long time ago. In the 1960s we had a gang called the Green-White. It was a group of youngsters who used to play softball but later turned out to be gangsters who fought against the police on the issue of permits. Their leader was the late Bra Tsikoe Sisana. They used to fight the police but were later all arrested. Some were sentenced to three years' imprisonment.<sup>9</sup>*

According to Tshepo Moloi of the History Workshop at the University of the Witwatersrand, the 'original' Three Million was formed by young people living in Seeisoville (one of Maokeng's Townships) in Kroonstad. They liked the song 'I've been robbed' by a group called Three Million. People in the area started calling them *ama*-Three Million (*The Three Million*). It started as a group of young people who liked wearing fashionable clothes and were known for their dancing antics.<sup>10</sup> During this period there was another group in Seeisoville which was called the Canadians. Therefore, there was fierce contestation for dominance of the area by these two groups. Another group known as the Ditsekelekwes was formed in the area. The latter was a community defence structure comprising young people under the age of 20. Samuel Mpho 'Berbeto' Taka, one of the gang members indicated the following about the emergence of this group and its activities:

*When the Three Million started, I was still a member of SAYCO in Maokeng. I joined it with a certain guy with the name of Tsietsi Thipe from Zenzele in the 16<sup>th</sup> Section. In fact, we had two ANC offices in the area, namely, the Maokeng Democratic Crisis Committee (MDCC) and the Activists Forum (AF). Initially, Diwiti and his sister Mamorena were members of the ANC. Diwiti later was against the members of the ANCYL because of Daniel George who was alleged to have had an affair with Diwiti's wife.<sup>11</sup>*

Of all the groups mentioned above, the Three Million was the most popular one, perhaps due to the fact that its origin could be traced back to the ANCYL. Another reason could have been the resistance which the group experienced from ANC-aligned structures in Maokeng Township. The gang's leader was George 'Diwiti' Ramasimong who, due to his operations within the group, became a fearless and notorious gang leader. Dikeledi Mary-Jane Tlali adds:

*Diwiti was a comrade. So, he went with other comrades to attend a funeral and they happened to clash during that time. When they came back, they separated and*

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9 C Twala (Personal Collection), interview, TJ Tumisi (Member of the ANC in Maokeng, Kroonstad), 22 July 2011.

10 E-mail: T Moloi, 4 February 2011.

11 C Twala (Personal Collection), interview, T Moloi, S Taka (former member of the Three Million Gang, Kroonstad), 13 August 2009.



*the Three Million Gang was formed and recruited new members. Later, there was a clash between the community and the Three Million Gang ... I joined COSAS when I was at the Reginald Cingo High School in 1990 doing Standard 9. Then the fight with the Three Million Gang started. They were nearer to Reginald Cingo. Then I became disturbed, and would bunk school, and would sometimes not sleep at home because I was running away from the police. On the other side, the Three Million were hunting for me. On realising that I was no longer safe, I ended up dropping out of school when I was doing Standard 9.<sup>12</sup>*

It was argued that the formation of the Three Million was precipitated by the disagreements between Diwiti and one of the ANCYL leaders, Daniel George. When the misunderstanding intensified between these two leaders, their supporters also joined in the fray and the Maokeng Township was divided between the Diwiti group, which later became known as the Three Million, and the George sympathisers. It was reported that differences between these two groups led to physical attacks and killings.<sup>13</sup> Tumisi recounts:

*In June 1990 one boy known as Five came to me and said Diwiti was busy organising them in order to fight against the comrades in the area. He told me that he had indicated to Diwiti that fighting the comrades was tantamount to fighting the whole community. In fact Diwiti was a thug here in the township who wanted political power; thus, he formed a gang which was against the progressive ANCYL. It was interesting to note that Diwiti was initially a member of the ANCYL. I think he was sent to be within the ANCYL by the police in order to infiltrate the organisation. I remember when a policeman called Ndweni was killed by the ANCYL members, Diwiti was also there. Surprisingly, only Makhanda and Oggies were arrested and charged with the killing of a police official. Diwiti was not arrested. That was when we realised that Diwiti was conniving with the police.<sup>14</sup>*

On the formation of the Three Million Gang, Tumisi further recalls:

*The existence of the Three Million Gang in Maokeng divided the township into two groups. To be honest, the elderly people in the township welcomed the existence of this gang because it was seen as an alternative to the misuse of power by the ANC-aligned structures in the area. It took some time and with interventions from us to convince some of them about the activities of this group. They were made aware that the group was a vigilante group and that the ANC structures were there to protect them. Therefore, it became our responsibility to protect the communities. In our mission to do so, there were some victims from both sides... In fact, the misunderstanding was caused by Diwiti Ramasimong and Daniel George who clashed over a girlfriend (Alice) and their supporters joined forces against each other. I remember that in September 1990, Diwiti came to my place with a group and demanded to know the whereabouts of George from me. Diwiti said he was*

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<sup>12</sup> C Twala (Personal Collection), interview, T Moloi, DM Tlali (former COSAS member in Maokeng, Kroonstad), 24 September 2009.

<sup>13</sup> E-mail: T Moloi, 4 February 2011.

<sup>14</sup> C Twala (Personal Collection), interview, TJ Tumisi, 22 July 2011.

*told by Simon Mofokeng that the previous day I was driving around with George and his (Diwiti's) wife. This Simon Mofokeng was a policeman. These youngsters who accompanied Diwiti did not question the involvement of a policeman in this matter. It became clear to me that Diwiti was working with the police.*<sup>15</sup>

Like many other gangs or groups operating as vigilante ones in other parts of the country, initially the formation of the Three Million was more of an attempt to dominate Maokeng Township ahead of the ANC-aligned structures. However, this situation created problems in the township. What started as a misunderstanding between Diwiti and George led to the division of the township residents into two faction groups.

### **The operations of the Three Million Gang**

The Three Million Gang had a sophisticated way in which attacks were conducted and this was accompanied by high levels of secrecy. The *New Nation* stated in August 1991 that: "The notorious Three Million Gang, which terrorised residents of Kroonstad townships, was highly organised and operated along military lines".<sup>16</sup> There was a line of command with the echelon manned by policemen, councillors and Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP) officials who, in turn, liaised with ten commanders occupying the second tier. Those in the highest echelons devised plans to be used during attacks against political activists and some township residents. This information would be passed on to the commanders who, in turn, controlled ten lieutenants, each in charge of a platoon unit. Lieutenants met the units to inform them about attacks to be carried out during missions and about strategies to be used.

The Three Million was also used to gather intelligence and carry out propaganda missions in the township, using these methods to sow confusion among residents. Members of this gang were informed about the activities of the political activists in the township of Maokeng. As a result, it was easy to identify activists and target them for attack. There were allegations that the gang derived most of its financial and strategic support from councillors, white business people and policemen who assisted with transportation, food and weapons. The councillors would help the gang members to identify the homes and provide addresses of potential targets.

There were reports about attacks by the Three Million Gang on the members of the ANC. On 19 April 1991 an ANCYL member, Isaac Masukela, a 16

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<sup>15</sup> C Twala (Personal Collection), interview, TJ Tumisi, 22 July 2011.

<sup>16</sup> *The New Nation*, 9-15 August 1991.



year old was stabbed in his home by a group of men identifying themselves as the Three Million gangsters. His mother, Maria Masukela stated that 7 men entered her home demanding to see her son. After a quarrel with her, they dragged her son out and one gangster stabbed him to death.<sup>17</sup>

In May 1991 there were rumours that the Three Million Gang was collaborating with the IFP. This was revealed by the Kroonstad IFP's organiser, Petrus Lenkwane. On Sunday 12 May 1991 the IFP had planned to hold a rally at the Seeisoville Stadium, but it was cancelled due to violence in the area. Lenkwane said that the rally had been cancelled because some residents had fled the township in fear that the IFP would kill them. He said that those fears were unfounded and explained that members of the Three Million Gang were "not criminals, but just an organisation like the Soweto councillor's party, Sofasonke".<sup>18</sup> There were fears that the rally would see the IFP taking the gangsters under its wing. These fears were fuelled by Diwiti's announcement that "Sunday will be the climax of our war in Maokeng". According to Dennis Bloem of the ANC, the IFP had a tendency to adopt discredited elements, such as criminals and use them to unleash violence in the communities. Maokeng residents said pamphlets purporting to have been issued by the IFP had also been distributed in the township. The pamphlets stated that the rally would address issues such as 'children who kill each other and burn houses; parents' reaction to such acts; and business people who buy guns for comrades to kill other people'.<sup>19</sup> In view of the above conditions, it was clear that the faction groups in Maokeng Township were destined into taking each other head-on. Unfortunately, such a situation contributed to the escalation of violence in the township.

In giving evidence before the Amnesty Committee of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), MS Taka and FM Taje, the sister of the Three Million Gang leader Diwiti, said that gang members became members of the IFP in the 1990s. This was allegedly encouraged by the prosecutor and a member of the SAP, who told gang members that criminal cases against them would be viewed as political if they were IFP members.<sup>20</sup> Statements such as the above had the potential to worsen the situation and members of the SAP became the targets of the ANC-aligned structures in the area.

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<sup>17</sup> *The Star*, 26 April 1991.

<sup>18</sup> *The New Nation*, 17-23 May 1991.

<sup>19</sup> *Sowetan*, 15 May 1991.

<sup>20</sup> Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) of South Africa Report, 3, (Cape Town, 1998), p. 368.

However, it should be noted that during the early 1990s, immediately after the unbanning of the ANC, the IFP was blamed for the violence in the country. Therefore, when it was indicated that the party was to hold a rally in Maokeng Township, there was a mixture of emotions; namely, fear, anxiety, hope, suspicion and downright hatred. In some instances mention of the *Zulus* evoked deep terror.

Residents of Maokeng indicated that although they recognised every political party's right to hold gatherings, they felt uneasy about the IFP's rally because of what had happened in other townships after the organisation's meetings. Ironically, the Maokeng Town Council had approved the holding of the rally there, but had previously refused ANC-aligned organisations such as the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) from holding such rallies. When approached by the ANC for the granting of permission to hold a rally there, the town clerk, PC Slabbert said the council had rejected COSATU's application because it was not a political organisation.<sup>21</sup> The information highlighted above clearly indicated the ANC-aligned structures were destined to target individuals and organisations which were viewed as anti-ANC. Honestly, it was unfair to drag the Maokeng Town Council into the whole factional groups.

### **The role of the law enforcement agencies**

Since the emergence of the Three Million Gang in Maokeng Township, law enforcement agencies did not have the option of ignoring the phenomenon. A series of programmes were initiated to address problems in Maokeng, but none proved successful in bringing about the much needed peace and stability to the area. Police involvement in diffusing the situation of attacks by the squabbling groups was criticised by the ANC-aligned structures in the area. While these agencies were attempting to revive the State's legitimacy in dealing with the problem of vigilantism versus the ANC, the acts of both groups exposed the limits of the State's capacity to secure justice for all, as well as the limited reach of having a non-violent society. The above argument is further endorsed by both Dixon and Johns who state that the State's incapacity to police and secure citizens and their rights worsened the acts of vigilantism.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> *Sowetan*, 15 May 1991.

<sup>22</sup> B Dixon & L Johns, "Gangs, PAGAD and the State: Vigilantism and revenge violence in the Western Cape", *Violence and transition series 2*, 2001.

Relations between the SAP and communities in and around Maokeng also remained a source of concern. Historical animosities and allegations of partisanship and complicity in the violence had left many in the community doubting the *bona fides* of the police. Rebuilding public confidence in the SAP remained a challenge. SAP members were accused by the ANC-aligned structures of fuelling the violence. There were also allegations levelled against the SAP that it was supportive of the Three Million in order to destabilise the activities of the ANC in the township. The above became evident on 3 January 1991 when the members of the SAP and ANC engaged in open confrontation in the township. The Maokeng ANC branch accused the police of not taking proper action against the Three Million which was said to be terrorising township residents and attacking its members in Maokeng. However, the allegation was disputed by the Free State police spokesperson, Col. Jonas Thobi. Thobi blamed the unrest in Maokeng Township on clashes between the Three Million, the Premier and the Canada gangs. He vehemently denied police partiality and stated that the police were maintaining law and order in the township.<sup>23</sup> Local ANCYL education officer, Meshack Moeketsi denied the involvement of the Premier or Canada gangs on the question of violence as indicated by Thobi. Moeketsi argued that township residents, among them a number of workers from the Premier Mills plant, decided to take action against the Three Million Gang after the killing of two residents. He further stated that the Canada gang had disbanded in 1990. According to Moeketsi, the ANC could not have been involved if the matter was between the local gangsters.<sup>24</sup>

Furthermore, on 7 January 1991 the police issued a statement dismissing the allegations by the Maokeng branch of the ANCYL that they were giving assistance which included remuneration to the Three Million Gang. Moeketsi said his organisation had obtained information that the gang was being backed by the police. He alleged that members of the gang were provided with a weekly remuneration of R500 by the police. The above was denied by the police liaison officer Lt. Johlene van der Merwe and indicated that 14 members of the gang had been arrested for being in possession of dangerous weapons.<sup>25</sup> Although the police claimed to have arrested 14 members of the Three Million, to the ANC-aligned structures in the township, that act was

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<sup>23</sup> *The Citizen*, 4 January 1991. For more information on the role of police and their abuse of power elsewhere in the world, see B Bowling, et al., "Police and Human Rights: Eliminating discrimination, xenophobia, intolerance and the abuse of power from police work", *United Nations Research Institute for Social Development*, 4, May 2004, pp. 1-7.

<sup>24</sup> *The Citizen*, 4 January 1991.

<sup>25</sup> *Business Day*, 8 January 1991.

just as smokescreen by the police. These structures alleged that in most cases, the arrested Three Million Gang members were usually released without charges pressed against them. Underneath is an example on how the police operated in the area.

Daniel Tsolo, one of the Three Million Gang members, described in *The New Nation* how police watched as members of his gang stabbed and hacked their victims to death. In a sworn affidavit, Tsolo stated that he participated in the killing of a worker from Premier Milling on 31 December 1990, but was not arrested despite police having been on the scene. Sello Motloung, one of the Premier Milling Company workers corroborated Tsolo's claims that police had failed to act against the gangsters after the murder.<sup>26</sup>

On 24 April 1991 the ANC organised a march to the Kroonstad police station to hand in a memorandum on the alleged murderous activities of the Three Million Gang in the area. Hardly 24 hours thereafter, members of the gang terrorised the people at the Kroonstad taxi rank. Members of the Three Million Gang were accused by the ANC of prompting taxi passengers and other members of the public to pay 'protection money' at knifepoint. According to the ANC's leaders, AP Lefafa and Bloem, this happened in full view of the police. The police arrested 9 members of the gang who were later released without any charge.<sup>27</sup> Amongst those released was a gang member whose victim, Isaac Masukela had been buried on 27 April 1991. This happened despite four young boys who came running to the police station to report that more members of the gang were outside, terrorising the public and this was reasoned as support given by the police to the gang members. When the police were accused of collaborating with the Three Million, the Free State Police Commissioner, General Tom Erasmus indicated that allegations that the Kroonstad police had failed to take action against this gang were made out of ignorance.

This incident by the police was described by *The Sunday Star* journalist Jon Qwelane as follows:

*Kroonstad police actually appear very embarrassed to act against known thugs who openly boast of their criminal connections in the presence of the police, and among whom is an alleged murderer whose schoolboy victim was buried yesterday. Depending on the police for protection in Kroonstad appears a worthless exercise because taximen and their passengers were robbed of money in full view of the police by known gangsters who, since September last year [1990], have terrorised*

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<sup>26</sup> *The New Nation*, 27 September -3 October 1991.

<sup>27</sup> *The Sunday Star*, 5 May 1991.

*Maokeng Township with impunity and the gang members walked away just like that. Fellow Sunday Star staffer, William Dhlamini and I came within inches of death in a Kroonstad police station, in the presence of armed policemen and the knifemen who chased us in there, walked away free still carrying their weapons. The police made no effort to arrest them after their spree of terror right outside the police station, where they openly robbed taximen and passengers of money at knifepoint, and later chased a man into the yard of the police station and stabbed him in the chest.<sup>28</sup>*

Besides the involvement of the police, there were some rumours that the Three Million was also supported by the councillors who wanted to see the ANC members eliminated. Meshack Ditsietsi Mmei remembers:

*You know the councillors here had problems with us. The councillors were protected by the Three Million and in return, they were given some resources. I managed to sit down with Oom Caswell Koekoe [the then Mayor of Maokeng Township]. I told him that the Kroonstad people loved him but they were aware he was supporting Diwiti and the Three Million. We were aware that he was supporting them financially and with food. He used to hide them and they sometimes used Koekoe's combis to drive up and down.<sup>29</sup>*

The TRC heard that individual councillors were responsible for setting up some of the vigilante groups because they felt themselves to be under attack from militant township youth. There were allegations from the ANC-aligned structures that in some cases, councillors were actively involved in vigilante actions, supplying arms and participating personally in attacks on township residents and activists thought to be aligned with the UDF. The TRC also heard that some vigilante groups were set up by members of the security forces, under the instruction of senior security police officers. Magistrates and prosecutors were accused of working to undermine criminal prosecution against gang members. Testifying before the Amnesty Committee of the TRC, Machabe Thulo who commanded the ANC Self Defence Units (SDUs) in Kroonstad alleged that a prosecutor in Kroonstad supported the gang and had helped them to evade prosecution. He said that magistrates deciding cases were guided by the views of prosecutors. Thulo named one magistrate in particular who would be called, together with the prosecutor, specifically to deal with cases involving gang members. Their sympathy with the gang frequently ensured that charges against gang members were dropped.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> *The Sunday Star*, 28 April 1991.

<sup>29</sup> C Twala (Personal Collection), interview, T Moloi, MD Mmei (former political activist in Maokeng, Soweto), 18 September 2009.

<sup>30</sup> TRC of South Africa Report, 3, ..., pp. 367-368.

Bloem stated the following to the TRC:

*You see, on various occasions what would happen would be this: for instance, there was one case where the Premier Milling Company's employees, were on their way to go and arrest the Three Million Gang and take them to the charge office. The police, who were already in Troubou where the Three Million Gang members lived, intervened. The police were waiting in their Casspirs on an open piece of land; they were waiting for the Premier Milling employees. I was present. I was sitting in a car with a certain Mr Touw to see what the police would do. The police chased away these workers; they shot teargas, whilst the Three Million Gang was present amongst the members of the police, in between the Casspirs, so these people were overcome by teargas. I clearly saw that the police did not take any action against the Three Million Gang who had weapons while these Premier Milling employees were unarmed.<sup>31</sup>*

The Amnesty Committee of the TRC also heard the application of Roland Petrus, who was sentenced to 14 years' imprisonment for shooting Diwiti. Although, during the TRC testimony, Petrus pleaded not guilty to Diwiti's murder, he claimed that he had killed the gang leader in a bid to end the gang's reign of terror in Maokeng Township. He told the committee that it was known that the Three Million were a hit-squad formed by the police. Therefore, as members of the ANC-aligned structures they wanted to eliminate the Three Million Gang. An ANCYL member Stephen Monyake told the Amnesty Committee during his testimony in Kimberley that he killed a Three Million Gang member, Tefo Molele on 2 May 1992 in Kroonstad. He told the committee that Molele's killing was not intentional, although he stabbed him 10 to 15 times.<sup>32</sup>

It is clear from the above section that the attack on the Three Million Gang was also precipitated by the alleged assistance the gang received from the police. Although the police claimed to be impartial in dealing with the problems facing the Maokeng Township, in one way or the other they were to blame for the escalation of violence in the area. The township councillors were also not spared in the criticisms. They were accused of using the gang members to protect them against the 'violent' ANCYL members in the area. Interestingly, from all the groups which were fingered to be instigating violence in Maokeng, no one wanted to be associated with the activities of the Three Million Gang. However, as mentioned before, there were pointers that the police and the councillors collaborated with the Three Million Gang.

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<sup>31</sup> TRC of South Africa Report, 3, ..., pp. 368-369.

<sup>32</sup> SAPA, "TRC told of killing of Three Million Gang member" (available at: <<http://www.justice.gov.za/trc/media/1997/9710/s971030b.htm>>), as accessed on 21 March 2012.



### **The emergence of the Self-Defence Units (SDUs) and the role played by the ANC**

Johannes Rantete writes that in 1990 the ANC proposed the creation of SDUs, stating in a document entitled *For the sake of our lives* that “in the wake of the ugly violence unleashed against our people by security forces, vigilante groups and hit squads, it is imperative that our liberation movement takes responsibility for guiding and building people’s self-defence units”.<sup>33</sup> While this proposal was welcomed by besieged townships and squatter settlements, it was not embraced by the government. The ANC in effect, won the battle over the SDUs, as reflected in the National Peace Accord (NPA) which acknowledged their legitimacy.<sup>34</sup>

The ANC’s SDUs evolved out of the demands from communities under siege from violence and the perceived partisanship of the police in maintaining law and order. Therefore, in some areas where the vigilante groups existed, the SDUs were instrumental in the protection of the communities. However, there were some problems accompanying the existence of such a structure, because it was viewed as being in contradiction with the work to be executed by the police; namely, that of offering protection to the communities. The ANC’s SDUs first emerged in various townships in the Free State in the early 1990s. While these units were created by higher commands in the ANC and MK at national level, they enjoyed a fair degree of autonomy at local level. The units came to operate like small private armies, controlled by prominent individuals, seeking to further their own political agendas. The great majority of the reported incidents of aggression by SDUs relate to arson attacks on homes. Although established in certain areas, they had some weaknesses. For example, the fact that they were the product of the ANC compromised their mission of protecting the communities and therefore resented by other political organisations. In the main, these units landed up in the hands of undisciplined youth.<sup>35</sup> Furthermore, the ANC was unable to arm the people sufficiently and most SDUs had to fend for themselves in defending townships against the vigilante groups.<sup>36</sup>

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33 J Rantete, *The African National Congress and the settlement in South Africa* (Pretoria, 1998), p. 100.

34 J Rantete, *The African National Congress ...*, p. 100.

35 For more information on the Self-Defence Units see T Motumi, “Self-Defence Units: A brief examination of their histories and a look at their future”, *African Defence Review*, 15, 1994; PS Rakgoadi, “The role of the Self-Defence Units (SDUs) in a changing political context”, *Research Report for the Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation*, January 1995.

36 J Rantete, *The African National Congress ...*, p. 100.

Residents complained that when night fell in the township, families feared raids by the Three Million Gang and the police. Political activists who were the target of the gang and the police, feared for their lives. Bloem confessed that he had been threatened with death by the gang. Besides Bloem, Teboho Frans Seloko also stated that on 23 February 1991 his family was woken up by the police demanding to search his house. One of the policemen asked him whether he knew Machabe Thulo or not. When he answered that he did not know him, he was assaulted. Seloko's allegations were dismissed and denied by the police. Jacob Tumisi told *City Press* that he had closed his three bottle stores in the township because of harassment by the gang and the refusal of the police to act on his complaints.<sup>37</sup>

In April 1991, about 10 000 residents of Maokeng chose to skip work and school in order to march to the local police station to register a strong protest about the criminal activities in the community, and complain about the allegedly relaxed police attitude towards the Three Million Gang. The residents threatened to revenge against the Three Million activities; hence at the later stage they formed the SDUs. Owing to the criticisms levelled against the police for siding and assisting the Three Million Gang in terrorising the community in Maokeng Township, in June 1991, the police succumbed to the ANC's pressure to make arrests of the gang members. On 14 June 1991, 35 members of the gang were arrested. Those arrested included gangsters such as Diwiti, Patrick 'Pabo' Sithebe and Israel Mangoejane. The gang was linked to 10 cases of murder committed between September 1990 and February 1991. The arrests followed the formation of a police special unit on 6 June 1991 to investigate all gang related crimes in Maokeng and to attempt to bring stability to the area. During the community's meeting which was addressed by the police on 16 June 1991, Maokeng residents and the local branch of the ANC expressed gratitude for the unit's help, offered their support and promised to involve the community in bringing witnesses forward.<sup>38</sup>

Local ANC member, Bloem congratulated *City Press* for publishing the activities of the gang, which had terrorised the township since September 1990. Political activists in the area were targets of the gang whose leader had openly vowed to wipe out all political activists in the area.<sup>39</sup> In order to tackle the problem of vigilantism and terrorism by the Three Million, the Maokeng branch of the ANC insisted on having a judicial commission appointed to

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<sup>37</sup> *City Press*, 24 February 1991.

<sup>38</sup> *Sowetan*, 21 June 1991; *The Sunday Star*, 23 June 1991.

<sup>39</sup> *City Press*, 23 June 1991.

investigate this gang and to inquire into all the reported incidents against the gangsters.

In April 1991, residents marched without magisterial permission. Tension ran high when heavily armed police apparently ordered the marchers to disperse. The northern Free State ANC leader Patrick 'Terror' Lekota, however, intervened to negotiate with high-ranking officers who agreed to allow the march to proceed. Lekota led the chanting crowd to hand in a memorandum and made an impassioned plea to the police receiving it, to bring the gang to book. Residents claimed they had reported cases against the gang and that the police had failed to act.<sup>40</sup>

Addressing a group of Maokeng residents who had marched to police headquarters in Kroonstad to protest against violence in the township, Lekota warned them against the use of violence in the township. He also warned the members of the ANC not to take the law into their own hands in the name of the ANC. This warning came after an incident in which a house was set alight by a group of comrades who claimed that sons of that family were involved with the Three Million Gang. Showing his leadership mantle, Lekota slammed ANC members who took revenge on innocent people, especially parents of children involved in gangster activities. The marchers, led by Lekota and Bloem, handed a memorandum to Lieutenant J Coetzee which was directed to Law and Order Minister, Adriaan Vlok and the Kroonstad Commissioner of Police. One of the demands contained in the memorandum to the police was the arrest of the Three Million Gang, which residents claimed had disrupted schooling, transport and made life unbearable in Maokeng. Residents also demanded that all alleged crimes committed by the gang be investigated by a special detective in collaboration with the community.<sup>41</sup> Addressing the marchers, Lekota observed:

*You are the ones who misled other comrades into taking the law into their own hands. If you want to go about killing and burning people's houses in revenge, do it, but not in the name of the ANC. The ANC does not encourage violence in any form, especially where innocent people are involved. Members of the ANC will not have blood on their hands because we believe that our struggle is a clean one. Our policy is one of non-violence and we have to follow this policy. If any of you feel that you can't do this, go and start your own organisation.*

Although the ANC's position on violence was far from clear-cut, officially it claimed to be committed to non-violence, but as the vigilante acts intensified

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<sup>40</sup> *The Star*, 26 April 1991; *The Citizen*, 26 April 1991.

<sup>41</sup> *City Press*, 28 April 1991.

in Maokeng Township, it became difficult for the ANC leaders to be vocal against popular violence. In most cases, the leaders defended it on the grounds that such violence was itself defensive.

### **The end of the Three Million Gang**

The beginning of 1991 witnessed the escalation of attacks on the Three Million Gang. For example, in 1991 Thulo was sentenced to 10 years imprisonment for murdering gang member, Masusu Ntema (Ngema) on 11 February 1991. According to Thulo, Masusu attacked him first, armed with a knife. In self-defence, he shot Masusu twice, killing him instantly. Nthabeleng Bothetsa was jailed for murdering one of Diwiti's lieutenants, Buti Sekotome in Kroonstad. On 24 February 1992, Diwiti who had just left the Kroonstad Circuit Court, where five of his gang members had appeared on a charge of murdering Samuel Nako, was gunned down next to the Kroonstad taxi rank. Roland Petrus was arrested with other four members of the ANC-aligned structures in Maokeng Township.

Four people who were suspected and arrested of having killed Diwiti were later released on bail. These were Isaac Andrew Petrus, Dennis Bloem, Cecile Anthony and Cassius Ntlakosi. News of Diwiti's death spread like wildfire with taxi drivers and motorists blasting their hooters, and women ululating as they flocked to the scene of murder. Tumisi who was held for questioning in connection with Diwiti's death stated that he had known that he (Diwiti) was to be assassinated that day. According to Tumisi, as ANC members, they had tried their utmost to see Diwiti dead.<sup>42</sup> One of the accused, Isaac Andrew Petrus was later gunned down in a street in Brentpark Township in Kroonstad and with his death violence in the area was resuscitated. Petrus with the others arrested with him had been out on R3000 bail and was to appear in the Kroonstad Magistrate's Court on 3 June 1992.<sup>43</sup>

In March 1992, another prominent member of the gang, John 'Bhudda Krag' Dinga, was murdered outside the Checkers Centre in Kroonstad. The same day, Bloem's nephew, Simon Bloem, was brutally stabbed outside the Kroonstad taxi rank. The gangsters dragged him into the toilets where he was allegedly stabbed to death.<sup>44</sup> According to Mpopetsi Dhlamini, the death of Diwiti was a relief to the Maokeng community. He equally blamed the police

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42 C Twala (Personal Collection), interview, TJ Tumisi, 22 July 2011.

43 *City Press*, 31 May 1992; *Die Volksblad*, 28 February 1992.

44 *The New Nation*, 6-12 March 1992.

for having supported the Three Million Gang which had consequently led to bloodshed in the area.<sup>45</sup>

The above mentioned incidents are an indication on how the existence of the Three Million Gang came to an end and how its leaders were brought to justice. This started with the elimination of the leaders of the gang, particularly Diwiti who was seen as the one masterminding the existence of this gang. However, it should be noted that despite the death of the Three Million Gang leaders, Maokeng Township was never the same again. The violence that engulfed the township for some time made the residents to leave in fear for a long period. This was eased when the ANC took over power as government of the country after the 1994 general elections.

### **Conclusion**

Many vigilante groups across the entire South Africa are crossing the line by terrorising the community members. This results in the communities taking the law unto themselves in dealing with such groups. In the main, the vigilante groups can be classified as non-state groups undermining the sovereignty of the state. The level of organisation and planning of the groups such as the Three Million indicated that vigilantism in post-1994 South Africa was not sporadic and isolated cases which contributed to mob violence.

As it rose to power in Maokeng Township, the Three Million Gang was thus in essence, a force to be reckoned with, even if it seldom explicitly manifested itself as such; it deliberately operated in the public sphere and sought to change the power relations of the times. It is obvious that to discuss the topic of the Three Million Gang raised fears in some informants. It is interesting to note that those who chose to comment phrased their statements carefully.

Besides seeking to stem the violent acts by the Three Million Gang, the ANC's strategic objectives were to attempt to organise and recruit new members. The ANC aligned structures wanted to demonstrate its political muscle in the township. What started as a gang turned out to be a militant vigilante groups which ended up terrorising the community of Maokeng Township. The article shows the impact that vigilantism could have on the communities. Therefore, it was important for the Maokeng Township community to radically deal with the gang. Although some people lost their lives during the scuffle of

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<sup>45</sup> C Twala (Personal Collection), interview, M Dhlamini (political activist and resident of Maokeng, Kroonstad), 6 March 2010.

violence in the township, the area became peaceful after the elimination of the gang members.

The analysis above indicated that townships such as Maokeng were in a state of disequilibrium due to the activities of both the Three Million Gang and the ANC-aligned structures. The township also experienced the state of dysfunctionality, mainly due the fear instilled by the gang members to the residents. The elimination of the Three Million Gang could serve as a lesson to other vigilante groups elsewhere in the country that there is no place for such activities.