

Families of gallows' victims praise Minister Mapisa-Nqakula

Families of political prisoners executed by the apartheid regime at the gallows in Pretoria's Maximum Security Prison in the 1960s have lauded the Department of Correctional Services for its plans to restore and unveil the gallows as a memorial, thus allowing them to deal with their long suppressed grief.

The department and Minister Nosiviwe Mapisa-Nqakula were also commended for setting up a series of workshops in the Eastern Cape and Gauteng ahead of the unveiling on 15 December 2011. The workshops in Mthatha and Queenstown on 21 and 23 November and one in Gauteng on 25 November served as preparatory sessions for the unveiling which will be preceded by a cleansing ceremony on 14 December.

The gallows

More than 4000 people and 132 political prisoners from various parts of South Africa were executed at the gallows by the apartheid government. However, the gallows were demolished in 1996.

Wanting to ensure the preservation of the country's struggle history and marking the 50th anniversary of Umkhonto we Sizwe, Minister Mapisa-Nqakula instructed that the gallows be restored and that a museum be established at the site for all South Africans. This, she said, would serve as a place of healing and remembrance.

The Minister hopes that the restored gallows will help teach future generations that "this is part of our history, where our children would pay homage to the liberation struggle of this country. This is a place where our children, when they see it, should vow that we shall never go back to where we were, NEVER AGAIN".

Pre-unveiling workshops

Minister Mapisa-Nqakula had then called upon the families of the executed political prisoners to come forward.

The call was met with a high turnout at the workshops organized by the Department of Correctional Services in Mthatha, Queenstown and Pretoria. The aim of the workshops was to prepare the family members for the cleansing ceremony and unveiling to take place in Pretoria on 15 December.

Hundreds of family members, community leaders including kings and chiefs turned up for the Eastern Cape workshops as well as officials from various government departments. The National Prosecuting Authority (NPA), Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), Social Development Department, municipalities as well as Correctional Services were all represented. Officials from the South African Council of Churches (SACC) and National Peace Accord (NPA) facilitated the workshops.

Among the guests at the Mthatha gathering was House of Traditional Leaders member and former President Nelson Mandela's grandson, Chief Zwelivelile Mandla Mandela, who passed on a message from his grandfather. "Madiba says he remembers our son who died like this while he was on Robben Island. He cries with you," said Chief Mandela. He was referring to a

struggle hero known as Golomi who was apparently hanged in Johannesburg while the former president was on Robben Island.

After speeches by officials, the families were broken up into three “commissions” of about 30 people and gathered in separate rooms. In these sessions, emotions ran high and tears flowed as family members poured their hearts out detailing the pain and hardships they dealt with before, during and after the execution of their loved ones.

This compelled the facilitators to allow for short breaks for lunch and to give family members, most of them elderly people, a breather. Many spoke about their need to have their loved ones’ remains exhumed and reburied at their homes.

The groups then reconvened and a representative shared the major points raised in each session. This was followed by a discussion and responses and undertakings from various government representatives to families’ concerns such as compensation and reburial of their loved ones’ remains.

NPA representative Thapelo Mokushane then explained that they would provide the families with assistance for the burials. His colleague Sphiwo Kahlane from the Priority Crimes Investigation said a number of freedom fighters were buried at three cemeteries in Pretoria – Rebecca Street, Mamelodi West and Zonderwater. These would be exhumed with the assistance of the families but with strict rules pertaining to tradition such as consulting the families before touching the graves.

After being exhumed, the graves will be inspected and confirmed using technological expertise, and then transported and buried at the families’ homes. The families will not have to pay transport costs and municipalities and military wings were urged to support with burials. Digging up of the graves will begin in January 2012, said Kahlane. The NPA would organise Social Development to help with counselling.

The workshops were concluded in prayer and singing of the national anthem.

Inputs from all three workshops will be combined and considered, said Head Office Chief Deputy Commissioner Ms Nontsikelelo Jolingana, who stood in for Minister Mapisa-Nqakula at the workshops. Mapisa-Nqakula was on government duty in the Democratic Republic of Congo at the time.

Unveiling process

Ms Jolingana explained the process to be followed at the unveiling of the restored gallows in Pretoria.

The event is scheduled to take place in two parts over two days. The first part, on 14 December, will entail a cleansing ceremony with family members of the executed political prisoners. The SACC will lead a church service on the day.

The second part, on 15 December, will be a formal function of the opening of the gallows by President Jacob Zuma. The programme was initially set for 6 and 7 December but was moved forward to accommodate President Zuma.

Jolingana clarified that 264 people - two from each political prisoner's family - will be transported to Pretoria "to see the last road travelled by their loved ones" before being hanged.

However, the Department of Correctional Services will not stop families who want to send more than two people to the event, at the family's expense. The families will enter the gallows in groups of 30 due to space constraints while others will watch proceedings on TV screens outside.

The names of the hanged freedom fighters already appear on the wall inside the execution room and another wall will be reserved for the names of so-called common criminals who were also hanged at the gallows.

Ms Jolingana said the workshops were a huge success. She was satisfied by the praise the department received from family members and community leaders. She said the event met more than Minister Mapisa-Nqakula's expectations.

"We are trying to heal wounds. We are bringing a nation building message - no one shall be killed in that manner again," said Jolingana.