

"Are we becoming the helpless victims of crime?"

By Bonke Dumisa

I RECEIVE many serious telephone calls and emails from concerned business people and the public about the levels of crime in South Africa. My counterpart on this column, Devi Rajab, wrote about the murder of David Rattray last week. I must say there were many compelling reasons for me to write about crime today. I have deliberately chosen not to say anything about the irresponsible murder of David Rattray -not because it is less important, but because I believe the public is saying a lot and has already said a lot about it. If those who are in the positions of power, who are in a position to drive down the levels of crime, choose not to commit to this, for whatever reasons, let their consciences deal with them.

The Bible says "abanezindlebe mabezwe", which means those who have ears must listen (to the anger of the public).

Environment

The Greater Durban Community Foundation, a non-government organisation, is engaging different stakeholders in coming up with programmes that will create a better environment for the communities where they live.

It is working with the community of Chesterville and Chesterville Extension in the greening of this area. The thinking here is that if more people plant trees and takes care of their houses and premises, there will be more pride in the people who live in such areas, and they will make sure they do not allow crime to dent the good image of the places where they live.

The eThekweni Municipality has recently upgraded the road that passes through the Isipingo shopping district.

The immediate direct benefit of this road upgrade is that the immediate vicinity of the main road looks more attractive; and you have fewer people who distract the smooth flow of traffic in that area. I am convinced there is a certain reduction of crime along the Isipingo main road now.

Driving through many townships, one sees a number of parks that have been created, which are now being used by the public for relaxation and recreational purposes. I am sure the kids who play at those parks are the same kids who could be making a nuisance of themselves along the road.

One has to acknowledge and give recognition to the eThekweni Municipality-it is delivering on the ANC's election slogan of "A Better Life For All". Even the most ardent of the ANC critics do concede that a considerable improvement has taken place in the former black areas, especially the townships.

It is against this background of good delivery that one has to look at ways in which such infrastructural improvements can be subtly used to divert people from crime.

In Umlazi, there is an expensive overhead pedestrian bridge that was built to reduce the number of people who are hit by cars. The problem with this good idea is that this particular pedestrian bridge has become a white elephant; nobody uses it.

Why is it that people do not use the bridge? Criminals targeted those who were using the bridge. Criminals would strategically enter the bridge from both sides and pounce on those pedestrians walking in the middle of the bridge. Everyone knew about the criminality but everyone said "hhayi mina" "not me", meaning they did not want to be singled out by those criminals because they confronted them (the criminals).

Cynical

The same thing happened to the overhead bridge linking the southern part of the Berea with the Durban University of Technology.

This bridge was built to reduce the number of DUT students and other pedestrians who cross from the southern part of Berea to the DUT through the N3 (Western Freeway). No one, especially a student, still uses this overhead bridge because criminals robbed students in broad daylight when they used this overhead bridge. Yet another expensive white elephant. There is yet another overhead pedestrian bridge that is a white elephant over the N3. This other bridge was aimed at providing easy pedestrian access from one part of Westville to the Westville area next to Chesterville. Criminal activity forced "someone" to put barbed wire right in the middle of this pedestrian bridge, presumably to stop the pedestrian flow from the Chesterville direction.

One cynical caller to one SABC radio programme asked: Why is it that our political powers have a zero tolerance for those who break the legal speed limit and even those who do not wear motor car seat belts, and yet those same officials do not have the same level of zeal and zero tolerance for the criminals?

I do know that the government at all levels, nationally, provincially and at local level, is seriously concerned about the crime levels in the country.

I know that they are irritated by the criminals who have hijacked the benefits of a new democracy to pursue their evil goals.

Zero tolerance on crime and regular arrests, prosecution and conviction of the petty criminals who harass pedestrians using overhead bridges; regular arrests, prosecution, and convictions of people who cut aluminium railings from the bridges; regular arrests, prosecution and conviction of people who sell stolen goods, especially stolen car parts and stolen car wheels, will go a long way in stopping emerging criminals from graduating into the premier league of criminality.

The zeal we have in putting up roadblocks to dish out traffic fines for people not wearing seat belts must be matched with equal if not more zeal in apprehending the real masterminds of the criminal world.

Failure to honestly and openly address the seriousness of crime in our country now is directly playing into the hands of those pro-apartheid forces who wanted to deceive themselves that blacks cannot run the country.

As I have said before, let us have the same zeal in arresting criminals, be they the murderers of Rattray, thugs who break into Umlazi homes, hijackers who

operate near the Mozambique boarder, or petty criminals who rob people who use pedestrian bridges.