



SA AGRICULTURE AND THE UNREST

When the balloon went up, who did the government turn to?

The protests sparked by the imprisonment of former president Jacob Zuma in early July of this year soon descended into anarchic mayhem. The looting of food stores, malls, retail outlets and small food supply businesses sent panic throughout the country. The plunderers and looters first targeted food outlets: supermarkets, warehouses, spaza shops, food transport trucks, mobile containers and malls. They then moved on to whatever else they could get their hands on. The spectre of the country running out of food must have haunted the powers that be because they turned first of all to the farmers to ensure that there was enough to eat for the citizenry, whatever else was happening in the country.

Leaked to the media was a government blueprint issued in a hurry to ensure that food, above anything else, would not be plundered or destroyed. The preservation of the country's food system and its safe distribution was priority number one for the ANC government. On Saturday 17 July 2021, Minister of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries Thoko Didiza issued a statement saying she was “working with farmers and other role players to ensure that there would be no shortage of food in Kwa Zulu/Natal and Gauteng.” The minister met with farmers in Durban to discuss the impact of the increasing unrest on agriculture and food sector. She also told communities not to panic and declared that “there is enough food in the country”, although the distribution of this food “could be a challenge.” A KZN agricultural group declared that transporters and distributors of food should be a target for official protection and that “protection and security of infrastructure during this distribution was of critical importance”.

INTERVENTION

The undated government blueprint outlined “intervention required within the next 24 hours”. (Clearly it was being prepared early in the week of July 12 as the looting and destruction got under way). Some of these interventions included “maximum security and protection of hot spots along the N3 and N2 national road routes; protection of key food production firms’ facilities and infrastructure (warehouses, bakeries, fresh produce markets, retailers and workers in KZN); transportation of key food processing ingredients (wheat, yeast and packaging material as well as animal feed) in and out

of KZN province; and the setting up of temporary sales points and storages (eg, mobile containers) in rural areas and townships, and integrating SMME's and spaza shops.

Immediate actions required to comply with the government blueprint were that food chain retailers and other actors would share information among themselves; that they would coordinate information concerning limits on sales quantities of food to ensure availability of supplies; that the safe transportation of food and non-food essential products would be ensured by protecting hot spots along the N3 and N2 national road routes in KZN and up and down the KZN coast; that existing food properties in Durban such as bakeries, milling facilities, distribution centres, storage facilities and fresh produce markets in Durban and Richards Bay would be protected; that temporary sales points and mobile containers in rural and township areas would be set up; that the availability of and access to fuel, electricity and water would be secured; and that transportation of animal feed for poultry and pigs in KZN would be protected.

It was re-emphasised in this government blueprint that the facilities mentioned required "immediate protection", and comprehensive lists of names and addresses of bakeries, maize milling facilities, distribution centres and storage facilities were included in the document.

WHO WAS RESPONSIBLE FOR TAKING THE ACTION REQUIRED BY THE BLUEPRINT?

Those in charge of putting the blueprint into action to protect essential food services were designated by name. Minister of Agriculture Didiza, for example, was to ensure optimal security and deployment of "security personnel" by 16 July 2021 "to safeguard and open the N3 and N2 transportation routes". This she was tasked to do "after consultation with security cluster". (It can be assumed this cluster meant the police and the army. There is no other official group tasked with securing national roads and road transportation in South Africa.) The minister was also to "ensure optimal security and deployment of security personnel by 16 July to patrol the identified key and strategic food processing facilities." A list of 16 bakeries was attached to the blueprint, as well as 26 maize milling facilities that needed "immediate protection". The "distribution centres" outlined by the minister in the blueprint needing "immediate protection" amounted to 36 in all, and they were named. They included Pioneer Foods, Simba factories, Boxer meat packing outlets, Spar supermarket in Phoenix (a suburb in Durban) and in other areas, Shoprite supermarkets, Pick n Pay food retailers, a food import warehouse, Woolworths, Ackermans, Pep stores, Clicks, SAB and Clover, to mention just a few.

A crucial point made was that Minister Didiza must provide "a contact person in the security cluster that private companies could contact for coordinating safe transportation of food along the N3 and N2 national roads." Minister Didiza was also responsible, with Ms. Ntshavheni, the president's press spokesperson, to provide "a

contact person within the security cluster that private companies could contact for protection of temporary sales points in rural and township areas.”

(Ministers Gordhan and Mbalula were tasked with providing a “contact person” who would assist businesses to facilitate the use of air freight for emergency food and medical items in KZN using the King Shaka airport.)

WHAT WENT WRONG?

It all looked very efficient on paper. However, it happened that the “security cluster” of which the minister speaks – presumably the police and the army – were totally overwhelmed by the numbers of plunderers and looters and burners, so the ability of the “security cluster” to contain anything, let alone the protection of bakeries, warehouses, the national roads and the mills, was woefully inadequate.

Persons who were actually contacted within the “security clusters” have not been revealed, if anyone was contacted at all. Clearly as thousands of looters and plunderers descended on shopping malls, supermarkets and warehouses and robbed these places to their hearts’ content, those within the “security cluster” who were tasked to protect these places were nowhere to be seen. In many instances, the overwhelmed police simply stood behind barriers and watched the passing parade of loot. It was not their fault – some tried to act but were hopelessly outnumbered. They ran out of rubber bullets. There was no barbed wire and no tear gas. The citizenry were forced to defend themselves and their properties using their own devices. Businesses were left high and dry, despite the contacts ostensibly made within the “security clusters”.

Supermarkets, malls, warehouses and hundreds of small shops were thrown to the wolves. Their staff could not keep the mobs at bay. The police (and then the army who were deployed at a later stage) were in many instances simply spectators. Where were the designated people within the “security clusters” which Minister Didiza was supposed to have selected and whose details were to be passed on to the food outlets so they could be contacted for protection?

THE DAMAGE

More than 300 Shoprite Holdings and Pick n Pay stores were hit by looters during the riots in both KZN and Gauteng. The Foschini Group reported 190 shops damaged and looted, while Pepkor announced that 489 of their shops had been plundered, as was one of their distribution centres. One hundred and eighty four Spar shops were looted and damaged. A video of a Spar truck burning on a road surrounded by dancing plunderers stealing the trucks’ contents was seen by thousands not only in SA but in Holland, seat of the company’s head office, and all over the world. (What an invitation to possible investors!). Massmart lost 33 shops to the mob, plus two distribution centres which were seriously burnt.

As for the highway situation, newspapers printed maps of “hot spots on the N3 and the N2” where transport vehicles were stopped, burnt and robbed. No police were seen near these vehicles to protect drivers, let alone the trucks’ contents. The plunderers’ N3 roadblocks started at Harrismith in the Free State and continued right through to Durban. There were ten places on the road identified as impassable due to violence and unrest. Some truck drivers were lucky to escape with their lives, others were not so fortunate. These crucial thoroughfares were closed to traffic for nearly a week, despite minister Didiza’s promise “to ensure security and deployment of security personnel to safeguard the N3 and N2 transportation routes, after consultation with the security cluster”.

(In the first quarter of 2021, transport truck hijacking increased 17.5% on the previous year. This burning of trucks has been occurring in South Africa for four years but the government has done nothing to control this hijacking tyranny. Each truck can cost between R3 and R5 million.)

Shoprite said of the 1189 outlets trading under the Shoprite umbrella, 119 stores had been “severely damaged as a result of looting and fire damage”. (The Star 21.7.21) Out of the 537-store South African LiquorShop businesses which were at the time restricted from trading under Covid-19 alert levels and lockdown regulations, 54 stores were impacted, while 35 out of the 340 South African furniture division stores were severely damaged by vandalism, looting and/or fire. Of the 444 SA- based OK franchise stores, 16 were badly damaged.

Pick n Pay said that 136 stores across the group were looted and/or damaged including 68 Pick n Pay stores and 68 Boxer stores. In addition 76 P n P and Boxer liquor stores were looted and/or burned. (Doing the rounds during the mayhem was a video of a Boxer store being attacked in KwaMashu near Durban, with no police in sight. The public were reporting on it and taking pictures but nobody from a “security cluster” appeared to help defend this store. Staff were doing their best to keep the mob at bay, with little success).

Massmart reported looting of 33 stores and two distribution centres. Mr. Price lost 7% of its total footprint, while Pepkor lost almost 9% of its total footprint. Tiger Brands lost stock of more than R150 million, while 200 liquor stores and warehouses were looted. Ninety nine of Famous Brands franchise stores (Wimpy, Debonairs, Fishaways) were damaged beyond repair and could not reopen. Its logistics warehouse in Westmead, Gauteng, was damaged beyond repair. (Rapport 18.7.21).

Many farms in KZN were targeted. Around 353,000 tons of sugar cane was burnt to the ground. Two broiler chicken farms and one chicken breeding farm belonging to Astral foods were burnt or vandalized. Thousands of day-old chickens had to be destroyed because there was no food for them. Dairy farms in KZN supply around 25% of the country’s fresh milk and some of these farms were targeted. According to paper manufacturer Sappi, 28 tons of pulp and 7 000 tons of paper worth R220 million were destroyed. Around 110 cell phone towers were damaged in the mayhem, and at

least 1 400 rural banks were decimated, with at least 300 post offices plundered. These examples are truly the tip of the iceberg.

So who within the "security clusters" did Minister Didiza contact? Police Minister Behke Cele? Police commissioner Sithole? Local police station officials? Will we ever know? All we can surmise is that the plan of "intervention" to prevent damage to South Africa went horribly awry, but nobody has commented on this monumental failure of putting into action what was promised in Minister Didiza's "intervention plan". This lapse cost South Africa the very fabric of its society. It almost cost the country its soul. Nobody appears to have been called to account for this particular catastrophe. Will a Commission of Enquiry get to the bottom of why the "security clusters" were not up to scratch, given the forewarnings and the locations of outlets to be especially protected?

It is ironic that when panic set in around possible food shortages, the government went first to the farming community and the food chains. These groups responded quickly and saved the day for the ANC. Despite the plunder and the looting, there was food available for 60 million people.

To date this year there have been 153 farm attacks with 25 people murdered, yet no comment has been forthcoming from Minister Didiza. Yet this week a black farm family was attacked and killed on a Free State farm. Minister Didiza's immediate press release denounced this incident. Last week Mpumalanga head of police said he would not rest until the suspects in the murder of a black security guard on a farm near Brondal were behind bars.

Said Henry Geldenhuys, TLU SA president: "It's tough not to conclude that the minister and her colleagues find the murders of some people more important than others."

We can add the trait of gratitude to the long list of the ANC's lack of many basic human virtues such as compassion, accountability, shame and a sense of responsibility. Why should we expect gratitude given their behaviour and their less-than-salubrious history?

Minister Thoko Didiza declared that she wanted to safeguard the food chain. The question is: will she have any food chain to safeguard if farmers are not secure on their properties? The source of all the food in South Africa is with 35 000 commercial farmers. If she ignores their welfare, in the end she will have no food chain to protect.