

Questions and Concerns About the Planned Relocation of the Citizens of Pomfret, North West Province: Forced Removal?

By Angela McIntyre

Introduction

In my capacity as a researcher working for the University of the Witwatersrand William Cullen Library, I have visited the town of Pomfret in North West Province three times between February 2005 and January 2006. The objective of these trips was to collect life histories of veterans of the Angolan war. What began as historical research has since been overshadowed by the growing crisis within the community. It has become extremely difficult for people to focus on the past when the present has become unbearable.

Over the past twelve months there has been a dramatic deterioration of living conditions in Pomfret, which has compelled journalists and members of the local community to seek answers from the people responsible, namely, those in Local and Provincial Government, as well as the South African Human Rights Commission. On my most recent visit, I accompanied a team of journalists whose objective was to investigate the motives behind the impending forced removal and nation-wide dispersal of the community there. The following has been compiled from observations as well as interviews conducted during these visits.

History

It is well known that Pomfret was once a SADF base and home to 32 Battalion, which was relocated from Namibia at the time of that country's independence. The unit was composed largely of Angolans of different ethnic backgrounds, including Bakongo, Chokwe, Ovimbundu, Kwanhama and others. Some of these had been soldiers since the early sixties and fought for the independence of Angola, only to become embroiled in what they describe as the "tribal war" that lasted until the death of UNITA leader Jonas Savimbi in 2002. Their movement, the FNLA, disintegrated, unable to secure the backing of either of the cold war factions. As they fled south to escape backlash from both UNITA and the MPLA, they were met by officers of the SADF, re-trained and then participated in the Border Wars as 32 Battalion until Namibian independence, when the unit was relocated to Pomfret, a former asbestos mining town in the North West Province.

After the unit was disbanded in 1993, some of its members were integrated into the SANDF, mainly 2 South African Infantry, now based at Zeerust. Many of the sons and daughters of 32 Bn members are currently members of the SANDF. The lingua-franca of the remaining community in Pomfret is Portuguese. Few of the older members of the community – the veteran/pensioners – speak an official South African languages with any fluency.

The responsibility for the management of the town was handed over to the Department of Public Works after the Defence Force left.

Recommendations were made at the Provincial level to hand over the

town as quickly as possible to the municipality and to “normalize” the administration. This transfer seems still to be pending and there is some resulting confusion over who actually holds responsibility for the community and its infrastructure. In interviews with both local authorities and the people, there is still the belief that the “old regime” is to blame for the current situation. *More than ten years after the democratic transition, however, the responsibility for Pomfret must be placed squarely on the shoulders of the current government, which has otherwise enthusiastically assumed the moral responsibility for rectifying the injustices of the past.*

The Removal Plan: the Community Experience

In January of 2005, a delegation lead by SADF General Moerani arrived in Pomfret to inform the community that they would be removed and the town demolished. The purported reason for the removal, given by the government, was asbestos contamination.

In at least 10 separate recorded interviews and countless informal discussions, local participants in this meeting related, without exception, the following:

1. Gen. Moerani refused to answer questions, stating that the decision had already been taken and that the people would now comply.
2. Journalists were removed from the community hall where the meeting took place.
3. The people were told by General Moerani that he had the backing of the police and the military, in case cooperation was not forthcoming.
4. At least five participants in this meeting reported that Moerani stated that it was “time go out and experience the suffering of the South African people”.
5. The people were asked to sign their names and preferences of places for relocation on a list. Few signed, and those who did, felt intimidated.
6. The removal and subsequent demolition would take place in June of 2005.

In spite of the claim that the removal was motivated by health concerns, the MEC for Housing and Local Development had earlier stated that the community at Pomfret was “a problem even outside the borders of South Africa”. He later contradicted this statement in an interview with SABC Special Assignment journalist Annamaria Lombard on January 12, 2006, at which I was present. In this interview, he also stated that the community had been uncooperative in spite of extensive and patient negotiations. The members of the community I have spoken with since early 2005 categorically deny that there has been any engagement with government authorities since January of 2005.

In subsequent interviews I conducted with community members in April of 2005, including teachers, elders, women and local business people the following concerns were raised about the removal:

7. The school year would be interrupted if the removal were to take place in June.
8. The dispersal of the community would leave its members alone and vulnerable to persecution and xenophobia, which they had already experienced in their dealings with local authorities.
9. The most vulnerable members of the community, including the elderly and the disabled elderly (bearing in mind that this is a community composed of retired war veterans and their dependants) would lose their support network. This was of deep concern given that many lost their families, or lost contact with them, between the period of approximately 1961 to 2002, when Angola was in a state of civil war in which millions of people were displaced internally or forced to flee the country.
10. The local crèche, housing some 70 children, including AIDS orphans, is an intricate part of this support network and a haven for children living in poverty and otherwise without adequate care. The crèche and its director, Meriam Nainda, are pillars of the community.

Pomfret is a close-knit and culturally unique community. It is not, however, isolated. Like many rural communities in South Africa where employment opportunities are few, people of working age leave to seek employment elsewhere, leaving the children in the care of grandparents and other family members. The costs of living in urban centres such as Cape Town, Pretoria and Johannesburg are high, and most Pomfret families, whether living on pensions or support from working members, as is glaringly evident from their living conditions, are barely scraping by.

June came and went and there was no further communication between the authorities and the community regarding the removal. Over the remainder of the year, the following was reported and later confirmed during subsequent visits:

11. The police station was closed in July of 2005.
12. The water situation had deteriorated. About half of the houses were receiving running water for a few hours every two to three days. The reason given for this by the community was the alleged theft of water pumps and the diversion of public water for private consumption through an illegal network of pipes and reservoirs. The perpetrator of these criminal acts is widely known, a government employee and was named repeatedly in conversations. People expressed fear of repercussions if this man's activities were to be reported, and asked not to be named.
13. Vandalism and petty crime were on the increase.
14. The local ANC counsellor, a member of the Angolan community, had been suspended and there was no longer local government representation, although 70 percent of the municipality's voters live in Pomfret.
15. There are no longer staff nor medication at the local clinic.
16. The absence of a mortuary in Pomfret means that the deceased must be transported to Ghanyesa (some 100 km away) and then back to Pomfret for burial. This is an exercise that few families can

- afford and so bodies are kept in homes until burial can take place.
17. The nearest hospital for the treatment of serious conditions is in Vryburg, nearly 200km away. Return taxi fare costs R110, a sizeable sum for those living on pensions of R700 per month, and an insurmountable obstacle to the right of the disabled to adequate health care.

By mid-2005, it was apparent that service delivery in Pomfret was being scaled-down even before the residents were given a definite removal date. This was acknowledged by the MEC in a January 12 interview in Mafikeng.

The people perceive this as a scorched-earth tactic, being implemented to make Pomfret uninhabitable and thereby encourage spontaneous departure. A rumour surfaced that the new removal date was set for December 2005. This was not communicated to the community, rather it was "leaked" by a local government employee to a local businesswoman. No official confirmation or communication of this date was apparent to any of the community members.

The Asbestos Ruse

Doubts began also to arise about the asbestos threat. Concerns have been raised since 1997 over the issue of asbestos contamination. Pomfret was the site of an asbestos mine, which closed in 1987, followed by a rehabilitation programme carried out by the mine operators, GEFCO (Griqualand Finance and Exploration Company). Questions surrounding the claim that asbestos danger was the motivation for the removal were raised by community members as such:

18. Why had the asbestos problem suddenly become urgent, when the community had already been exposed for over a decade?
19. Where is the scientific data supporting the claim of an asbestos problem?
20. If the latter exists, why has it not been brought to the attention of the community?
21. Why have no community members been tested for asbestos related diseases?
22. If it were to be revealed that people were suffering from asbestos related diseases, would there be compensation?
23. What about other communities affected by asbestos? Were they also being removed and dispersed?

These doubts were reinforced after a January 2006 visit to Heuningvlei, a town north west of Pomfret, also the site of an asbestos mine. Richard Spoor, a leading South African activist and expert on asbestos, was contacted by telephone for a brief consultation on January 11. His comment was that the Bute mine site, some 20 km from the town was extremely dangerous and that we were unlikely to see anything like it elsewhere in the world. He also reminded us that there is no safe exposure limit to blue asbestos. On our arrival, we found:

24. The town of Heuningvlei is surrounded by eroded tailings heaps of

- rock containing veins of blue asbestos.
25. The road out of Heuningvlei, to Bute mine, which is used by pedestrians, cars and donkey carts is carpeted with blue asbestos dust that rises in visible clouds as people and vehicles pass.
 26. The mine site, which contains several tailings heaps of over ten meters in height, is not fenced, nor are there any warning signs posted on the road.
 27. There are inhabited dwellings within 200 meters of the dumps.
 28. There is no plan currently to relocate the people of Heuningvlei despite the obvious presence of asbestos.
 29. The local SAPS officer who guided us to the mine site seemed unaware and unconcerned of the danger.

The visit to Heuningvlei made very apparent a double standard in the handling of asbestos risk to the population. Why, in a time of scarce resources, is there such urgency to remove the population from Pomfret, an untested and unproven case in which the social costs will be extraordinarily high, when Heuningvlei is an environmental disaster unfolding? In October of 2005 a public tender was issued for the rehabilitation of the Heuningvlei mine and relocation was not even considered an option.

There were no less than six tenders for asbestos mine rehabilitation projects in Northern, Northwest and Northern Cape provinces in the Government Tender Bulletin of October, 2005, (see annex). Pomfret is conspicuously absent from the list. This may invalidate the claim that it is more economical to remove the community than to upgrade the existing rehabilitation measures. None of the mines up for tender has undergone rehabilitation to the extent that Pomfret already has. There are clearly more compelling cases for population removal (Heuningvlei) than Pomfret. From this situation, there is no apparent system of prioritization based on environmental risks.

Conclusion

The question on everyone's minds at the moment is whether there is some unexpressed motivation for the proposed demolition of Pomfret. There is anger, suspicion and despondency among the people. I have little doubt that if the process is carried out in the manner in which it was initiated, that is, with total disregard for the rights and dignity of the inhabitants, South Africans may yet witness the spectacle of children and elderly and disabled citizens being forcibly removed from their homes in a process that is already perceived as politically motivated.

Overall, I can conclude from my visits to Pomfret the following:

30. The manner in which the removal process has been conducted has been completely opaque, if not secretive, non-participatory and arrogant.
31. The use of a uniformed military officer to address a group of civilians was entirely inappropriate and smacks of intimidation.

32. To leave a community for a full year with the sword of forced removal hanging over its head, in an information vacuum, is nothing less than inhumane.
33. The withdrawal of municipal services from the community, while the community is still intact (which, as a result of the handling of this process, is now in crisis and actually requires *extra* support) constitutes an act of sheer callousness on the part of Local Government.
34. The imperative to disperse the community is incomprehensible, given that, in similar cases, all efforts have been made to preserve the cohesion and integrity of communities that are culturally unique (see the example of the San (also of Angolan origin) veteran community relocated from Schmidtsdrift to Platfontein).
35. The withdrawal of services from the people of Pomfret, at a time when Local Government is under pressure to improve service delivery, is blatantly discriminatory.
36. The failure to schedule Pomfret for rehabilitation and the decision to remove and disperse its citizens is also discriminatory.

Based on my knowledge of and experience with this community, I suggest that the following steps should be taken with urgency:

- 1 The community must be informed immediately of the status of the relocation process and municipal services restored and maintained.
- 2 An explanation for why Pomfret is not scheduled for rehabilitation should be offered by the Government.
- 3 The testing of the Pomfret environment for asbestos contamination should be carried out immediately by an independent and reputable authority according to international standards, and the results made accessible to the community.
- 4 The population should be tested for asbestos-related diseases and counselled on the dangers of exposure. Regardless of the fate of Pomfret, the people should be monitored for latent and long-term effects for as least as long as it takes for diseases to show symptoms and to cause illness, since lung cancer and asbestosis may not be immediately apparent.
- 5 Any patients with asbestos-related diseases should be guaranteed proper medical care and compensation from the Government.
- 6 If the results of this testing prove compelling enough to support the option of removal, the *social costs* of removal should be independently and professionally assessed and systematically factored into the overall cost of removal. This should be conducted according to an internationally accepted methodology. The same strategy should be applied to all communities in South Africa currently living with asbestos risks.
- 7 The full cost including the social costs of removal should be

compared to the cost of rehabilitation of the site to make it inhabitable.

- 8 The removal of the community should be considered as a last resort.
- 9 Community workers must be dispatched to counsel and advise people on the procedures and the preparation of the necessary paperwork to qualify for subsidized housing.
- 10 The special needs and entitlements of the disabled and other vulnerable members of the community must be meticulously addressed throughout the process.
- 11 The proposed dispersal of the community to different settlements throughout the country is unnecessary and punitive and should not occur under any circumstances.

An enquiry into the systematic violation of the rights of the people of Pomfret should be initiated with the aim of preventing the recurrence of this shameful situation.

Annex

EXERPT FROM THE GOVERNMENT TENDER BULLETIN, PRETORIA, 21 OCTOBER 2005 NO 2409

Invitation of bids for the appointment of an earthworks contractor for the rehabilitation of the derelict & ownerless **Langley Asbestos Mine: Northern Cape Province**. A compulsory site visit at the Asbestos Mines on 10 November 2005 @ 15:00. Preference will be given to BEE companies with equity of 50+1. Further information: Ms Zodwa Nkosi/Mr C. Khosa Tel. (012) 317-8255/8312 Department of Minerals and Energy, Pretoria: Head Office ME-560 2005-11-21 11 11

Invitation of bids for the appointment of an earthworks contractor for the rehabilitation of the derelict & ownerless **Heuningvlei- Bute Asbestos Mine: North West Province**. A compulsory site visit will be held at the Asbestos Mines on 8 November 2005 @ 10:00. Preference will be given to BEE companies with equity of 50+1. Further information: Ms Zime Ndlangana/Mr C. Khosa Tel. (012) 317-8053/8312 Department of Minerals and Energy, Pretoria: Head Office ME-559 2005-11-21 11 11

Invitation of bids for the appointment of an earthworks contractor for the rehabilitation of the derelict & ownerless **Hartland Asbestos Mine: Northern Cape Province**. A compulsory site visit at the Asbestos Mines

will be held on 10 November 2005 @ 08:30. Preference will be given to BEE companies with equity of 50+1. Further information: Ms Zodwa Nkosi/Mr C. Khosa Tel. (012) 317-8255/8312 Department of Minerals and Energy, Pretoria: Head Office ME-558 2005-11-21 11 11

Invitation of bids for the appointment of an earthworks contractor for the rehabilitation of the derelict & ownerless **Bestwell Asbestos Mine: Northern Cape Province**. Evaluation will be based on the 90/10 principle. A compulsory site visit at the Asbestos Mines will be held on 9 November 2005 @ 14:00. Preference will be given to BEE companies with equity of 50+1. Further information: Ms Zodwa Nkosi/Mr C. Khosa Tel. (012) 317-8255/8312 Department of Minerals and Energy, Pretoria: Head Office ME-557 2005-11-21 11 11

Invitation of bids for the appointment of an earthworks contractor for the rehabilitation of the derelict & ownerless **Corheim Asbestos Mine: Northern Cape Province**. Evaluation will be based on the 90/10 principle. A compulsory site visit will be held on 10 November 2005 @ 08:30. Preference will be given to BEE companies of equity of 50+1. Further information: Ms Zokwa Nkosi/Mr C. Khosa Tel. (012) 317-8255/8312 Department of Minerals and Energy, Pretoria: Head Office ME-556 2005-11-21 11 11

Invitation of bids for the appointment of an earthworks contractor for the rehabilitation of the derelict & ownerless **Jebolo Asbestos Mine: Northern Cape Province**. Evaluation will be based on the 90/10 principle. A compulsory site visit will be held on 9 November 2005 @ 09:00. Preference will be given to BEE companies with equity of 50+1. Further information: Mrs Zime Ndlangana/Mr C. Khosa Tel. (012) 317-8053/8312 Department of Minerals and Energy, Pretoria: Head Office ME-555 2005-11-21 11 11

Footnote added by SA-Soldier.com:
For more information about 32 Battalion, please visit www.32battalion.net