

Durban's disappearing street kids and the World Cup

There is a long history of official child-abuse, denialism and fibs in Durban, from on high at 2010 offices, and City Hall and a certain Point Penthouse, and also from below in Metro Police facilities.

Sunday Times

February 14, 2010

<http://www.timeslive.co.za/sundaytimes/article305799.ece>

Metro police deny charges of street children abuse

By Monica Laganparsad

Street children have accused the Durban metro police of removing them from the city

This week youngsters from nine to 19 told the Sunday Times how metro policemen rounded them up daily and dumped them on the city's outskirts, often on busy freeways or at unregistered shelters.

Child rights workers say there are more than 400 children living on the city's streets. "They tell us we must go back where we came from. They say Durban is dirty because of us," said a 13-year-old boy.

Said a 19-year-old girl: "They take us and drop us at Umgababa, Umgeni Road, Pietermaritzburg freeway and Hammarsdale. Sometimes they leave us on the road and we walk back to Durban.

"If us girls don't want to go to jail, they (police) say we must sleep with them so they can release us."

A 16-year-old girl said: "Sometimes they take our blankets, our clothes and our money. They spray us with tear gas."

But metro police spokesman Superintendent Joyce Khuzwayo denied the removals were World Cup-related, saying police acted on complaints from the community.

She declined to comment on the abuse allegations but said they would be investigated.

Local NGO Umthombo said the police's methods were inhumane.

The organisation said the welfare of the children was more important than Durban's image.

CEO Tom Hewitt said: "Street children are not a safety and security issue, but a social development issue. Police put children in the back of trucks with adults and gang members. It exposes the kids to more trauma."

He said removing children for the World Cup was not about child protection but about cleaning up the streets.

Khuzwayo said Umthombo and the municipality's Safer Cities project were supposed to "take charge of the children. The police are involved because of all the complaints from the community. They (children) sleep under verandahs, they steal, they mess up the place and sniff glue."

This week the Sunday Times visited a shelter in Hammarsdale, near Pietermaritzburg, where many of the children say they were dumped.

A nine-year-old boy said he had been brought there by metro police. There were no social workers or caregivers and the child was found alone under a tree. He said he had not been fed that day.

Owner Nobhule Dladla, who funds the centre alone, said police and social welfare brought homeless adults and street kids to her centre because there were no available shelters in Durban.

She said police wanted to clean up for the World Cup.

Martin Xaba, head of Safer Cities in Durban, said: "Safer Cities has not instructed the police to round up children but we facilitate the removal of these children through the proper procedures, together with the social welfare department and eThekweni Health."

Mail and Guardian

22 January 2010

A regular "street-cleaning" exercise by eThekweni metro police -- with one eye on the World Cup -- is drawing outrage from hard-hit street children in Durban and the organisations working with them.

Street children who spoke to the Mail & Guardian accused the police of using violence during the round-ups, which usually see them corralled into vans and dumped in "safe houses" far from Durban's central business district.

Said 13-year-old Kheto Ngcobo: "Sometimes they kick us with their boots and they beat us with their hands. Once, when a fight broke out [between two knife-wielding adults] in the police van, I got sprayed with pepper. My eyes burned and burned."

Ngcobo was one of 14 street children rounded up by police this past weekend and dumped -- with adults -- at a safe house in Hammarsdale, about 40km outside Durban. He said that, with others, he escaped and stole a train ride back to the city.

Round-ups have often happened in Durban before major international conferences or sports events.

Now, with the World Cup in mind, it appears metro police have stepped up their efforts. The children allege that the police sometimes attempt to take them back to their homes, but end up dumping them on the roadside.

Seventeen-year-old Wendy Ndlovu said she and two friends were recently left in Amanzimtoti, 30km away. "[The police] dropped us near the garage. I asked the people where town was and we started walking. We walked all night and we slept in the bushes," said Ndlovu.

"[The police] say we can't be here [in the city] for the World Cup and that they will take us to a nice place. But they end up leaving us anywhere or in these scary houses."

NGOs say the round-ups "deepen the trauma experienced by arguably South Africa's most vulnerable children" and undo their attempts at "therapeutic rehabilitation".

Tom Hewitt of Umthombo Street Children -- which operates in Durban's Point area, where most of the city's estimated 400 street children live -- said: "The police don't have the social welfare training to deal with the children. They're

also transporting them with adults and housing them in places where homeless adults also live.

“This could lead to sexual abuse and coercion into criminal activity.”

Umthombo runs sports and arts programmes aimed at empowering street children, including daily surfing lessons. Children waiting for its city-centre offices to open greet Hewitt with the question: “How are the waves, Tom?”

Hewitt says that Kheto Ngcobo has been on the streets for nine years and was caught in a number of round-ups over the holiday period, leaving scars. “Street kids aren’t as resilient as people think they are; they develop coping mechanisms, such as drug abuse, to deal with trauma.”

It remains unclear who is ordering the round-ups. Metro police spokesperson Senior Superintendent Rajen Chin said police were merely “following orders from the municipality” and doing their jobs.

“It’s against the Children’s Act to have these children sleeping on the streets. We take them to a safe house where they get attention. We’re doing it every weekend. Whenever we have a spare van we round them up and take them there,” he said.

But the council’s safer cities department head, Martin Xaba, tasked with dealing with street children, prostitutes and homeless people, claimed the practice has officially stopped.

“Our office is currently working with the Health Department on a more integrated strategy to deal with street children and others on the street,” he said, adding that the new approach, drawing in more social workers and ensuring more after-care, would be ready by the end of the month.

According to Lucy Jamieson, a senior advocacy coordinator at the University of Cape Town’s Children’s Institute, delays in enforcing sections of the Children’s Act of 2005 facilitate police crackdowns.

“The police are still operating on the Child Care Act of 1983, which doesn’t make provision for street children. The Children’s Act is more sophisticated; it recognises street children and sets up processes for a more holistic approach for dealing with them, including outreach programmes, assessments and the provisions of services. But five years down the line this is still not operational.

“So the police are within their rights -- but they don’t appear to be interpreting

the law considering the most important factor: what's in the children's best interests?"

Jamieson said there were delays in finalising the details of legislation presented to Parliament early last year. "Provinces also haven't made plans to implement the Act, but hopefully this will be resolved by April," she said.

That street children are a provincial responsibility is also a sticking point in KwaZulu-Natal. Stakeholders said the provincial department regards street children as a safety and security issue, rather than a social one.

Umthombo News

January 2010

<http://www.umthombo.org/site.php?level=8&id=80>

* Umthombo CEO is guest on Mandla Shongwe's Saturday morning show on SAFM (23/01/10): Tom Hewitt (Umthombo founder and CEO) spoke on SAFM about Umthombo's programmes and his hopes around the urban phenomenon of street children in 2010. He also talked of the dawn a "new era" in Durban which, he believes, is happening right now where it will become socially unacceptable to allow 'round-ups' of street children by enforcement agencies in Durban but where citywide strategies that empower children to leave street life will demonstrate Durban as a caring city.

* Umthombo welcomes a fourth full-time social worker to its team (22/01/10): Umthombo welcomes social worker Sithembile Mbhele to the team. Sithembile, who will be overseeing the Reintegration and Aftercare programme joins Ashika Pramlall (programmes Director and senior social worker), Emma Sibilo (who runs the therapeutic programmes at Safespace) and Thandeka Mkhize (who runs the weekend programmes at Safespace). Very soon we will be appointing a fifth social worker to oversee the outreach programme at Umthombo. These social workers oversee teams of Child and Youth-care Workers.

* Mail and Guardian article about the Metro Police round-ups of street children in Durban (21/01/10): <http://www.mg.co.za/article/2010-01-22-rounded-up-and-shipped-out> SA media is starting to pick up on the rounding-up of street children in Durban. Remember that Danny Jordaan (head of the local organising committee for the FIFA World Cup 2010) recently said that he will not support any campaign that attempts to hide street children. When asked about whether they would be removing street children from the streets for the world cup he said:

"No, we can't be a society that misleads and creates a false impression. We are a country of diversity, rich and poor, employed and unemployed, and the world must know that we have massive challenges of poverty and housing and we must address these issues." For the IOL article with Danny Jordaan see:

http://www.iol.co.za/index.php?click_id=13&set_id=1&art_id=vn20090917103326640C229116

* Metro Police round-up children and adults from the streets and dump them, all together, at a so-called "centre" in Hammersdale described by the children as "an ugly place" (18/01/10). Kheto is 13, Xolani is 20. They both live on the streets. One is a child, one is a young adult. They need different types of services in order to leave street life. They were among a crammed van of children and adults that were picked up off the streets in Durban by Metro Police (Licence plate number:) and driven out of town, some hours, to a town called Hammersdale where they were dumped at a centre called "Nobuhle." The children said that there were babies, children and adults there and they described the place as "an ugly place". The children escaped immediately and jumped a train back to Durban. metro's actions are wrong in so many ways. Firstly, Metro police officers are not trained to be first point of contact with street children. Secondly, forcefully removing children from the streets to satisfy safety and security agendas and create a "clean" image of Durban around 2010 is a disgrace which heaps more trauma upon street children and is PR suicide for the city. Thirdly, detaining adults and children together is illegal and immoral. Moreover, street children and street adults need separate interventions of assistance. Mixing the two is extremely dangerous for the children. Fourthly, removing a child from the streets with no social working intervention completely ignores the therapeutic needs of street children in overcoming the traumas associated with their experiences. Fifthly, removing children from the streets on an almost daily basis plays havoc with the delicate processes that organisations like Umthombo are engaged in with the children to empower them to be able to leave street life sustainably. Sixthly, arrangements between so-called care facilities and Metro police as places where they can dump children that they round-up need to be investigated. What is the incentive for the care facilities? Any centre that admits both children and adults (other than mothers and babies) needs to be investigated. Umthombo CEO, Tom Hewitt followed the round-up on Sunday morning, taking pictures and communicating with Kheto through the bars of the van whilst the van was stopped outside the Elangeni Hotel. Ironically at the same time, at the back of the hotel, metro Police was escorting, with great fanfare, the South African national soccer team, Bafana Bafana. Umthombo recognises that eThekweni Municipalities other departments are NOT involved in the round-ups and it appears to be that Metro Police is acting unilaterally. STREET CHILDREN IS A SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT ISSUE WHERE CHILD FRIENDLY AND THERAPEUTIC SERVICES ARE VITAL IN THE PROCESS OF EMPOWERING STREET CHILDREN TO BE ABLE TO LEAVE STREET LIFE.

ENFORCEMENT AGENCIES MUST BACK OFF. METRO POLICE - DO NOT LEAD DURBAN INTO 2010 SHAME. Umthombo will be posting the names of the Captain in charge of the round-ups and the ultimate chain of command so that concerned citizens and football fans both in SA and overseas can campaign for the ending of round-ups (forced removals.) Watch this space. Both Xolani and Kheto arrived back in Durban and came separately to Umthombo with their stories.

* Shameful: Metro Police round-ups (forced removals) of street children in Durban continue in run-up to 2010 FIFA World Cup (10/01/10): Street children continue to be harassed and rounded-up on an almost daily basis in Durban. Siphellele, 14, who currently has his broken arm in a cast, was removed from the city streets by Police and dumped in one of the townships on the outskirts of Durban. He walked back. Other times the children have alleged being dumped outside of the city. Umthombo is aware that SAPS (South Africa's national police) are NOT involved and have a generally good relationship with street children. It is the municipal police (Metro Police) who continue to do this. Once again, Umthombo states that street children are NOT to be "dealt with" through enforcement strategies based on Safety and Security philosophies but rather empowered compassionately to be able to leave street-life sustainably. This is a social development issue.

The Star

September 17, 2009

We will not hide street kids in 2010, says Jordaan

By Barbara Cole

The chief executive of the 2010 Fifa World Cup organising committee, Danny Jordaan, will not support any campaign that attempts to hide street children, he said on Wednesday.

"As a country, we should not be ashamed that we have the poor. We should not hide it, but address it," he said in response to a question from journalists at a media conference in Durban.

People had often asked him if the shacks and street children would be removed, he said.

"No, we can't be a society that misleads and creates a false impression. We are a

country of diversity, rich and poor, employed and unemployed, and the world must know that we have massive challenges of poverty and housing and we must address these issues."

He recalled that there had been a programme in 2006 when the street children had been gathered together, cleaned up, fed and had trained with the visiting Tottenham Hotspur team.

Perhaps another programme could be launched during 2010, he said.

Organisers would have to see what they could do to "address these issues, to restore their dignity and human worth; to give them a sense that there is a place in the future for them", he said.

"Let's not trample them. It is an unfortunate situation, but it is a reality," he said.

Jordaan was giving an update exactly 15 years to the day since South Africa wrote a letter to Fifa expressing an interest in hosting the World Cup.

Now, as the country moves towards the 200-day mark to the 2010 Fifa World Cup, the stadiums "... among the best in the world" are nearing completion, ticket sales are soaring and "it is going to be... the best world cup ever", he said.

* This article was originally published on page 3 of Daily News on September 17, 2009

The Mercury

April 2 2009

Street kids 'won't disappear' for 2010

Durban's street children would not be whisked off the streets in the backs of police vans before the 2010 World Cup kicked off in the city, only to miraculously reappear on the streets when visitors had returned home, eThekweni municipal manager Michael Sutcliffe said at the fourth SA Aids Conference in the city on Wednesday.

Sutcliffe spoke at a plenary session dealing with street children in Durban, human trafficking and the World Cup.

He said the city faced the challenges of providing services to rich international visitors as demanded by the national government and soccer governing body Fifa, while continuing to serve poor and vulnerable residents.

“When the heads of state are going to appear at conferences, the first thing that security does is move the street children out of the way so they can’t be seen. Four years ago we used to deal with it that way, but we are not going to deal with it like that any more.

“We have to use the event to our advantage to advance our economic, social and sustainability agendas. It (the World Cup) has given the city the opportunity to ramp up its investment in public infrastructure and to bring it to the poorest of the poor by building more clinics and providing social facilities,” Sutcliffe said.

However, he said, while street children were a “visible” social problem, the city had the challenge of caring for eight groups of vulnerable people including the “invisible” poor.

“We have 100 000 households in the city who have no income and they contain about 500 000 family members. And there are those households living off casual labour,” Sutcliffe said.

“There are workhouses. Walk just one mile from here and you will find 17 or 18 buildings which are like rabbit warrens with women working with their children at their machines,” Sutcliffe said.

Recent research done by the University of KwaZulu-Natal showed that most street children (86 percent) were excited about the World Cup, while 13 percent said they looked forward to watching it and 7 percent were excited about seeing people from other countries.

The research found that 95 percent of street children wanted to go home but could not.

Street children were particularly vulnerable to human trafficking as they could be lured by promises of jobs abroad.

Tom Hewitt, co-chairman of the KZN Alliance for Street Children, said the World Cup could be a catalyst for meeting the needs of Durban’s street children, but a joint effort was required.

He said a recently developed national policy framework on children living and working in the streets would provide direction to the drive to get street children

back into their communities.

He said 2009 was the first year in which there were fewer children in Durban's streets.

The International Organisation of Migration's Durban manager, Bongiwe Mdlatsha, said the organisation had trained 1 215 people in the National Prosecuting Agency, the police, and the departments of Health and Home Affairs to identify and tackle human trafficking.

* This article was originally published on page 3 of The Mercury on April 02, 2009

The Mercury

November 13, 2008

Patrick Bond, Rebecca Hinely & Oliver Meth

Great White Shark mauls Albert Park refugees

Eye on Civil Society column

Pressure from Durban City Manager Mike Sutcliffe - whose police nickname is now "the Great White Shark" - and the prospect of the 2010 World Cup were apparently the reasons municipal police attacked refugees on November 1 and compelled them to flee Albert Park last Saturday.

The 47 refugees, largely women and children, hailed from the eastern region of the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Their last four months of suffering in central Durban is documented in a Centre for Civil Society photographic exhibition - "We're still here!", snapped mainly by refugee Delphin Mmbibya - now on display at UKZN's Malherbe Library and on our website www.nu.ac.za/ccs

But this week the Albert Park refugees are gone, scattered, convinced that Durban is hell. One, Akili Kabila, escaped Saturday's raid and went to Pretoria on Monday to plead - in vain - with United Nations officials. Two dozen others fled to Botswana, and the rest are unaccounted for, trying to survive underground.

This is the fourth attack these refugees endured: once as exiles from the world's most bloody region (suffering an estimated four million dead); then pushed out of Durban neighbourhoods by xenophobia in May; then attacked by cops on the steps of City Hall in July, when Sutcliffe first encountered them; and now as punching bags for a vicious police force which originally moved them to the Park four months ago.

Subsequently, the cops have become even more reckless and violent, regularly imposing the death penalty on suspects before being charged.

We interviewed police in charge of the November 1 attack, which hospitalized Aziza Wilongdja, a mother of six who subsequently fled to Gabarone. Constable Kwesi Matenjwa of the central Durban police station spoke to us four hours after destroying the refugees' plastic shelter and confiscating most of their goods (including official refugee papers).

Mthenjwa: 2010 is going to be here, so the people from the so-called other countries, when they come to this country, they must have this image that South Africa, the city of Durban is clean, that there are no vagrant people, there are no traders in the streets.

Q: Did they tell you about the rights of people, that if they are taken away they must have somewhere to go?

Mthenjwa: Yes. I'll tell you one thing, about the technicalities of the law and the constitution of this country I am well aware of it. It's just that, at some stage, you get thrown in a deep ocean, in a deep sea whereby you cannot even swim.

Q: And the human rights have drowned with you too, eh?

Mthenjwa: Yes, they have drowned in the sea. No matter how good you are in swimming, you can't even swim because you are just a small fish in a deep ocean where only the big boys, the sharks, the so-called white sharks exist in the environment.

Q: The white shark? Who is the great 'white shark'?

Mthenjwa: That's what I'm saying. You know, I'm a human being and I don't want to say things that at the end of the day, maybe they will bring fire to me.

Q: And you are fairly sure that you have to follow these [eviction

orders] because they come from the very top, is that Mike Sutcliffe?

Mthenjwa: Thank you, thank you!

Last week, the former UKZN planner told The Mercury the refugees are "criminals". A few months ago, Dr Sutcliffe told the Mail&Guardian he is a "Marxist geographer".

We're also academics and believe this to be profoundly disrespectful to both words. Actually, Sutcliffe reminds us of traditions more closely associated with Pol Pot or Serbian ethnic cleansers, ridding the city of poor people and immigrants.

In contrast, the traditions of Karl Marx and humane geography are to empower the masses and transcend spaces of inequality. Last month, a United Nations report labeled South African cities the world's "most unequal".

This government merely spouts radical rhetoric and instead of changing the content of apartheid geography, changes the form, such as the name of Moore Road to Che Guevara.

Meanwhile, thousands of brutalized people will continue trying to transcend regional spaces of inequality, looking for relief in Durban. The Albert Park refugees hailed from an area not unfamiliar to us, because every day we use one of its main products, coltan, when we make a cellphone call.

And if we (or our pension funds) have shares in AngloGold Ashanti, we're doing well by the eastern DRC, thanks in part to the company's operations in Mongbwalu. Ashanti acquired mining rights to 2000 square km there in 1996 during the reign of dictator Mobutu Sese Seko. By 2005, Human Rights Watch documented AngloGold Ashanti's payments to notorious warlords of the National Integration Front.

"Our central purpose is to find and mine gold profitably," explained its then chief executive, Bobby Godsell (now Eskom head): "Mistakes will be made".

According to a recent investigation by Michael Deibert of CorpWatch, "A November 2007 report by a special commission of Congo's Ministry of Mines concluded that the terms and lack of transparency in Ashanti Goldfields' original contract violated Congolese law and was thus

subject to renegotiation.”

SA reparations to the DRC should be negotiated, too. The Mbeki government bent over backwards to inject SA mining houses into the DRC, even lending the Kinshasa government R760 million in 2002 so as to repay the IMF for 1970s-80s loans to the dictator Mobutu, in exchange for easy entry by Joburg mining houses. The UN documented several SA firms’ role in the DRC’s war-time looting, but no action was taken.

From their Pretoria office, the UN High Commission on Refugees offered Albert Park’s refugees a stingy two-month rental/food reintegration package, which they rejected because the meager funds were not enough to find accommodation and because more serious problems remain: security and human rights. Xenophobia was not just momentary, during the May attacks, but runs much deeper, threatening them daily.

Until Sutcliffe finally drove them out and underground.

The Great White Shark mauls his subjects again and again: more than 700 informal economy traders arrested in a single day in 2006; anti-privatisation municipal bus drivers and Abahlali shack-dwellers denied their rights to march in protest; street children and women beggars at intersections; sexworkers; fisherfolk; working-class residents near South Durban’s toxic industry; crime victims from Wentworth’s burgeoning nightclubs; and the Glenwood hoi-polloi angered by the misspelling of an ANC heroine’s streetname.

A coalition of aggrieved South Africans recently turned out another distant, impervious ruler. Sutcliffe can count himself lucky that the forces in Durban civil society he has victimized remain fragmented – for now.

(Bond directs the UKZN Centre for Civil Society; Hinely is a Georgetown University Center for Democracy and Civil Society visiting scholar at CCS; and Meth is a CCS researcher.)

The Daily News

September 22, 2008

Begging 'a ruse for drug mules'

By Vivian Attwood

Public concern at the rising number of beggars on Durban's streets will grow if a report that some are acting as drug mules under the guise of begging from passing motorists is substantiated.

Denise Cochrane, a trustee of the I-Care foundation for street children, revealed that a worrying new trend had come to her society's attention. "When it comes to mothers with babies and small kids, don't be fooled. We have discovered that some are drug mules who use begging as a ruse, but are actually passing drugs on to clients. We encountered one instance where the 'baby' a woman was carrying on her back turned out to be a doll. There is a whole subculture in operation."

While police have not confirmed that there are large numbers of beggars who double as dealers, substance addiction is one of the perils faced by people who live on the street. City manager Michael Sutcliffe last week announced plans to clamp down on motorists who give money to beggars, as one way of tackling vagrancy and social ills like drug and alcohol abuse that go hand-in-hand with the problem.

Sutcliffe expressed particular concern about children who are dragged into the downward spiral of begging, saying: "From a safety point of view, apart from the other issues, this practice is quite unacceptable. No caring mother wants her kids subjected to that. It's a form of abuse."

He confirmed that several women who bring children to the streets to beg have already been prosecuted.

"We will be stepping up prosecution," he said. "We are reviewing our involvement in social service issues and have mandated a team to make revisions in the way we deal with street children, vagrancy and the feeding of the poor on the city's streets. Changes will be implemented within the next few months."

Denise Cochrane supports Sutcliffe's decision wholeheartedly, although she thinks it will only be a partial solution to the problem of street beggars.

She is emphatic that children on the street are a danger to themselves and to motorists.

"Many motorists give money to appease their conscience, but it does not solve

the underlying problem," she said. "The children are tempted to buy glue or other addictive substances, and when they are little boys, the older ones take the money off them."

The I-Care trustee bemoaned the shortage of awareness programmes to highlight the dangers to children of life on the streets. "If the city were to adopt a more active stance it would go a long way towards resolving the issue," she said. "Support organisations know that the problem does not stop when you give money. You need first-phase shelters, rehabilitation facilities, homes for street children, schooling and reintegration into communities.

"It's a huge social problem that has devolved from the historical practice of men leaving their homes to find work. Their families were left behind to cope in increasing poverty.

"Add drugs to the mix and it's no wonder we have such a high incidence of crime. We have a generation without boundaries."

She suggested that matters might improve "if the Department of Social Welfare started doing what they are mandated to do," but conceded that "the department was swamped, and needed fresh direction."

Tom Hewitt, co-director of the Umthombo street children's movement, which featured prominently in a recent Daily News series on the lives of street children, said: "The suggestion to fine those who give to people begging on street corners is an important development, but it must be stressed that there is a difference between street kids and the mothers with babies and kids on the streets.

"Umthombo is firm that street children need therapeutic, compassionate intervention that helps put them into the process of returning to community life," he said. "Any form of enforced outreach that is not based on child care best practices, and doesn't acknowledge the trauma street children have endured, will fail and is wholly inappropriate.

"That said," Hewitt continued, "we believe the mothers who bring kids on to the streets are guilty of child abuse. It could even be argued that it is a child labour issue."

Hewitt agreed that giving money to people on street corners could create dependency, but said withdrawing such donations "would inevitably spur crime and prostitution among desperate, impoverished people".

"Durban is coming very close to having a more considered citywide approach to

the problem of people on the street," he said.

"A number of role-players are buying in, including the Department of Social Development and municipal and SAPS representatives. They meet regularly with the KZN Street Children's Alliance, which comprises organisations of integrity like Streetwise, Zamani, Umthombo, I-Care and Youth for Christ."

* This article was originally published on page 8 of The Daily News on September 22, 2008

Daily News

July 3, 2008

'We watched cops beat kids'

By Vivian Attwood

Two British visitors to Durban expressed shock and disappointment with the city after witnessing and taking photos of Metro police officials harassing and intimidating a group of beachfront street children.

Child rights organisations have reacted in anger at the incident which took place on Tuesday, and eThekweni and Metro have started their own investigation, saying that the city did not condone such behaviour.

There has been a series of unconfirmed reports from street children that they had been rounded up before major tourism events and abandoned some distance from the city.

In 2007 the Daily News reported an incident where an attorney saw Metro police officials burning street children's belongings.

Joe Walker and his wife, Annabelle, woke at about 7.15am in a flat in the Grosvenor Court building, overlooking the former Military Museum on Snell Parade, to be confronted by the sight of billowing smoke and terrified children.

"I could hardly believe what I was seeing, or the irony of the situation," said Walker.

"I work for a children's rights organisation in the UK called Street Action and

have been to Durban on previous visits to liaise with local NGOs that work with street children. I hardly thought I'd be confronted by blatant human rights violations while on holiday here, though.

"I raced outside and across to the hillock opposite the museum, and saw three Metro police officials lashing out at the children with sjamboks.

"My wife was documenting the events with her camera cellphone from the flat, and filmed the burning of the children's clothes and other belongings by the police officials.

"Since we arrived in KwaZulu-Natal I have chatted to those particular street kids on a number of occasions, so I tried to intervene and request that the police extinguish the fire. The three police officials were extremely menacing, and threatened me with imprisonment.

"'These kids are the main cause of crime and drugs in this area,' one of them bellowed," Walker said.

"That's absolutely untrue. This particular group of children takes enormous pride in keeping their persons and clothing neat and clean, and none of them sniffs glue. They have seen what it does to their fellow street children."

Skating

Walker said that in his opinion, the city was skating on thin ice by courting potentially negative international media coverage of its stance towards street children.

"Apart from the aggression shown by the police officials, the fact that they arrived with both a police van and a large police transport vehicle makes it plain that if I hadn't interceded, the children would have been forcibly removed from the area and dumped somewhere outside Durban, as they say has happened many times in the past," he said.

"It feels like these round-ups are being sanctioned from on high. We will definitely be putting the images we captured on our website.

"The Durban Metro Police need to realise that they are violating children's constitutional rights. These are serious actions that will inevitably be exposed in the international media."

Later in the morning, several of the street children gravitated back to the site of

Tuesday's confrontation. They were clean and clear-eyed, but obviously very nervous.

"We are scared, but we don't know where else to go," said a 16-year-old girl.

"They said they are coming back, and we don't want to be put in the truck. Sometimes they take us very far from Durban and leave us there."

Metro Police spokesperson Senior Superintendent Thokamile Tyala said the incident had not been brought to his attention, but that an investigation would be launched.

"I must stress that we do respect children's human rights," he said.

"If these events happened, then those responsible will be called to account and can be punished. They are not above the law, and due processes will be followed."

City manager Michael Sutcliffe said: "If this incident took place as it has been described, action will be taken against those involved. I will need a full report from the Metro Police. Until I have had a chance to examine it, it would be inappropriate to comment further."

Joan van Niekerk, national director of Childline, said she was "absolutely appalled by the allegations".

"This is the second fairly serious incidence of police brutality towards children that has been reported to Childline in 2008," she added.

"The first, in the North West, required the intervention of the Child Law Centre in Pretoria."

Van Niekerk said that Tuesday's incident underlined the extent to which vulnerable children on the street were "not seen as human beings but another genus altogether".

Tom Hewitt, chief executive officer of the Umthombo Street Children advocacy organisation, said: "Metro Police seem to be operating unilaterally."

In contrast, the municipality's City Health department and the Point and Durban Central SAPS have in 2007 embarked on positive steps towards more compassionate and strategic solutions to the issue.

* This article was originally published on page 3 of The Daily News on July 03, 2008

The Mercury

November 22, 2007

Where are Durban's street children?

By Sharlene Packree and Heinz de Boer

Durban's usually bustling street child colonies have all but disappeared from the city after what is believed to be a major police crackdown ahead of this week's Fifa preliminary draw.

City officials remain at odds over the fate of dozens of children, who are believed to have been rounded up by SAPS and Metro Police units before being taken to Westville Prison.

Social workers say this happened after the children and some adults with small children were charged for loitering and given fines they cannot afford. Some may spend up to 90 days behind bars.

'The children were... handed over to social workers'

City manager Dr Michael Sutcliffe has however strongly denied the allegations, saying he would "never condone" such police action.

But Metro Police spokesperson Superintendent Thozamile Tyala, confirmed that beachfront children were collected by Metro Police in a routine operation.

"We always remove the street children from the beachfront. The children were taken to a place of safety and handed over to social workers," he said.

The Daily News visited several hotspots in Mahatma Gandhi Road (Point Road), Addington Beach, Blue Lagoon and Central Durban where street children are usually seen. There were no children in sight in any of these areas.

There were no children begging at traffic lights or along the beachfront. Adult vagrants at Addington Beach said the children had been rounded up over the weekend and collected by Metro police vans.

'So where have they gone to suddenly'

A social worker, who asked not to be named out of fear of falling foul of city authorities and who works at a Durban shelter, said the children were picked up by Metro police and charged with loitering.

She said they were taken to Westville Prison.

"Hopefully this is the last time it happens. They can't keep doing this to these children. We should find a permanent solution," she said.

Sipho Mabaso, who works with street children at the Sakhisizwe Reception Centre near Margaret Mncadi Avenue (Victoria Embankment), said that on average there were 200 children living on Durban's streets.

However, since Monday, Durban's street children have disappeared from many of their popular city haunts.

"On average, we see about 5 or 10 children at the reception centre. I haven't seen any of these kids since Monday," he said.

Mabaso said it was "very suspicious" that the children are nowhere to be seen at a time when there were international delegates and media in the city.

"Everybody knows street children are a problem in Durban. So where have they gone to suddenly?" he said.

Sutcliffe has meanwhile called on people with details of forced removals to bring forward evidence.

"Dealing with street children is a social welfare issue, and the Metro Police is not involved. We as the city will never be associated with that.

"It has been an issue discussed at the Joint Operations Centre, and police have been instructed to certainly take away their glue if they are seen with it.

"Obviously there is a heightened police presence now, so the street children tend to not hang out as much," Sutcliffe said.

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City Manager's Newsletter

13 May 2005

Mike Sutcliffe

<http://www.durban.gov.za/durban/government/media/cmn/20050513Street%20children/view>

Screaming headlines claiming that eThekweni is rounding up street children and ushering them out of the public's eyes to avoid them being seen by tourists, provide evidence once again of the shoddy state of some of our media and their lack of transformation. Of course there is also clear evidence that the headlines were deliberately timed to embarrass the city's extraordinary efforts to showcase our country and Africa at this year's tourism Indaba.

By all accounts this year's Indaba has been an outstanding success and particularly the leisure industry, but also the city of eThekweni, should be thankful that SA Tourism have given us the opportunity to host the Indaba.

That these headlines had a clear political agenda is evidenced through a Democratic Alliance councillor being given the right to espouse untruths as if they were facts and no attempt was made to get comment or the facts from the Mayor as political head or myself as administrative head of this city.

What then are some of the basic facts that we should bear in mind when evaluating this tabloid trash. Firstly, we are committed to ensure an improved quality of life for all the citizens within eThekweni. This places an obligation on the Municipality to attend to the well being of vulnerable groups. This also means we need a safer inner City and must address the urban decay. We strive to have a city that is clean, safe and well run within the resources available to us.

Secondly, even though social welfare is not a direct city responsibility, the fact is that the city council and officials have decided to draft and implement a policy assisting vulnerable groups like street children because we care. Within the available resources we are doing everything we can to return these children to homes where they belong and take them off the street. We have a reception centre on Victoria Embankment in the city centre. A visit to our reception centre on the Victoria Embankment will show any number of children voluntarily coming in. All children who enter the centre have an opportunity to shower and get a hot meal.

A first phase shelter was set up initially in Ottawa and presently in Ohlange, Inanda and children are taken there. This is a temporary arrangement as we are advertising to get NGOs to partner with us and the others spheres of government. We have an extensive outreach programme to identify existing and new people on the street, and this includes a team of Council staff and volunteers from various NGO's, CBO's and FBO's working in the field. How a DA councilor could then claim that she does not know where children are taken suggests that either she has not read council agendas or is deliberately trying to bring the council into disrepute.

Thirdly, the programmes, although growing in scale, have achieved the following over the past five months or so. 347 children have been reunified with their families. While some have returned to the streets and we have to repeat the reunification, most of the reunifications have been successful. 76 children have been placed in shelters run by the department of Social welfare through our work.

187 children are in our first phase shelter at Ohlange. Many children have been put through detoxification programmes run in our outreach programmes, through our reception centre and through the first phase shelter. And, 787 street children are participating in various programmes that have been implemented as part of our strategy. The reality is that it has been easier to get children off the streets now for two reasons: (i) With the advent of colder weather, it is easier to get children to our shelters; (ii) With the increased police presence that an event like Indaba results in, children are easily persuaded to get off the streets by us. Indeed many came to our outreach workers and voluntarily asked to be taken to the shelters.

We are working on the streets with a number of roleplayers on an ongoing basis and not just when we host conferences.

May I conclude that we are unapologetic about stepping up our existing programme to get children off our streets. But we must also address the reasons why children get onto the streets in the first place and that will take some time.

We can understand outrage if we were rounding children up and dumping them in jails or the outskirts of the city. That is not what is being done. We have put in place a well thought through, pro-active strategy to get vulnerable children off the streets and into care. All elements are not yet in place, but over the next few months we hope to have everything working properly. At the same time, we would hope that responsible media and all other interested parties work together

positively to ensure that these, our children, have a better life.