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December 11 2011 | **R16.00** Inc. VAT | Botswana **P14.95**, Dubai AED **25.00**, Lesotho **R14.95**, Namibia **N\$27.95**, Swaziland **R15.50**

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INSIDE A SOUTH AFRICAN POLICE DEATH SQUAD SHOOT TO KILL

Today the Sunday Times lifts the lid on killings committed by an elite police unit

Special investigation by STEPHAN HOFSTATTER, MZILIKAZI WA AFRIKA and ROB ROSE

THE Sunday Times has uncovered evidence of an alleged "hit squad" operating in KwaZulu-Natal under the ultimate command of the province's Hawks boss, Major-General Johan Booyesen.

The Cato Manor organised crime unit in Durban has allegedly committed scores of assassinations, some in retaliation for suspected cop killings and others related to ongoing taxi wars.

Booyesen was previously the provincial head of organised crime. Suspended police chief General Bheki Cele caused a stir among provincial top brass last

Police in KwaZulu-Natal, and the Cato Manor unit in particular, have been doing just that.

Official figures from the Independent Complaints Directorate (ICD) show in the past three years KwaZulu-Natal police killed 527 suspects during the commission of a suspected crime, an escape, an investigation or arrest — by far the highest in South Africa. The Cato Manor organised crime unit accounted for 45 deaths.

The ICD confirmed this week that six members of the Cato Manor unit had been investigated, some of them for killing suspects.

Captains Mossie Mostert, Eugene van Tonder and Anton Lokum and the late Warrant Officer Rakesh Maharaj are among those being investigated. None of them could be interviewed by the Sunday Times this week, according to police spokesman Colonel Jay Naicker.

The Sunday Times has, during an investigation that began last year, obtained testimony and copious evidence from dozens of people about the killings, including hundreds of death scene photographs and expert ballistics reports.

Three senior police officials, a pathologist and a ballistics expert who examined the images concluded that they appeared to have been executions. None would be named.

The Sunday Times has also interviewed several taxi industry bosses who claim to be assassination targets of the unit, and witnesses of at least two killings who refuse to make sworn statements to the ICD because they feared they would be killed.

Suspicious police killings linked to the unit include:

- KwaMaphumulo taxi boss Bongani Mkhize, killed on Febru-

... AND HAVE A BEER WITH YOUR MATES AFTERWARDS



Members of the Cato Manor organised crime unit celebrate just hours after killing five robbery suspects on the N3 highway near Camperdown on January 21 2009. The members with visible faces (not blurred) are, from left, Captain Eugene van Tonder, Captain Mossie Mostert and Captain Anton Lokum

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Police who examined death scene photographs said they appeared to be executions

year when he unexpectedly promoted Booyesen to head the Hawks in KwaZulu-Natal, even though his unit had courted controversy through its disproportionately high kill rate of crime suspects.

Cele has been blamed for fuelling the killings of taxi bosses by making inflammatory remarks. According to court papers filed by taxi bosses fearing assassination at the hands of the unit, Cele reportedly said, speaking at the funeral of a slain police taxi task team investigator Superintendent Zethembe Chonco: "If SAPS members cannot arrest suspects and they feel that their lives are threatened they must take them to the nearest mortuary."

ary 3 2009 on Umgeni road after he took out an interdict in a bid to prevent police killing him;

- KwaMaphumulo taxi boss Lindelani Buthelezi, whose wife says he was "executed by police who entered my home";

- Sandle Kinglock and Musa Qwabe, both suspects in the murder of a Durban lawyer, killed by police on September 14 2009 in two separate incidents;

- KwaMaphumulo taxi boss Magojela Ndimande and his bodyguard Sibusiso Tembe, killed on the N3 highway at Merivale on September 16 2008. Witnesses say the police fabricated claims of a shoot-out;

- Five robbery suspects shot on the N3 near Camperdown on January 21 2009, which police followed with a drink-fuelled celebration;

- Four suspected cop killers massacred together on a mattress in a house in Inanda on April 13 2009; and

- ATM bombing suspect

Lebogang Ranyali killed on March 27 2009 in Pinetown.

In an interview with the Sunday Times this week, Booyesen denied any knowledge of a hit squad. "I would strongly disagree with you. Their lives were at stake, they defended themselves in a shoot-out," he said.

He said it was unfair to brand the unit a hit squad because of its high kill rate of suspects, given the high number of violent criminals arrested by members. "Cato Manor only investigates murder, armed robbery, ATM bombing, serial killing and serious rape cases," he said. "They made 437 arrests in the last two years. The facts are, they do arrest very violent people."

Last month Colonel Navin Madhoo — an officer in the

provincial procurement office charged with trying to bribe Booyesen with R2-million to drop a R60-million corruption case — gave the Hawks boss a memory stick, hard drive and two CDs containing hundreds of photographs showing what appear to be gruesome killings of suspects at the hands of the police.

The images included several post-kill celebrations of members of the Cato Manor unit. In an affidavit, Madhoo says Booyesen asked him to get the CDs as they contained "incriminating evidence of serious crimes in a unit under his direct command".

The Sunday Times has obtained the photographs.

Asked if he believed it was callous to hold a party after killing suspects, Booyesen said

there was nothing wrong with police enjoying "social events".

The Camperdown images show close-ups of three of the suspects shot in the head. "That's troubling. With head shots you want to look closely for evidence that suggests execution," said a senior pathologist. "You would expect [many] more body and limb shots."

This was confirmed by the ballistics expert and two senior police officials, who said head shots of fleeing suspects were "highly unusual".

The experts all referred to images of weapons in several of the killings, including those of Qwabe, Ranyali, Buthelezi and Mkhize, as "highly suspicious". They cited unusually clean guns in pools of blood and improbable positioning of suspects' firearms.

In court papers ballistics expert Kobus Steyl — a former member of the ballistics section of the SAPS forensic science

laboratory with 19 years' experience — concluded in two of the cases that "the shooting of the suspects, as alleged by the police, is questionable in regard to the self-defence scenario".

Although questions were put to individual members of the Cato Manor unit about their role in the killings, police spokesman Naicker said the policemen "cannot speak" as the ICD investigations "have not been finalised [and] we don't want to compromise [them]".

In September, the South African Communist Party's provincial leader, Themba Mthembu, issued a public resolution calling on the government to launch a judicial commission of inquiry to probe the Cato Manor "death squad".

"The Cato Manor squad is the new Vlakplaas, they operate in the same style," he told the Sunday Times this week, referring to the apartheid-era unit led by Eugene de Kock that assassi-

nated opponents of the National Party government in the 1980s.

"We strongly believe that the duty of the police is to investigate and arrest suspects. But this unit has been killing more suspects than putting them behind bars."

Booyesen said he would have "no objection to something like [an official probe] — it may prove once and for all that the picture created about Cato Manor is totally wrong".

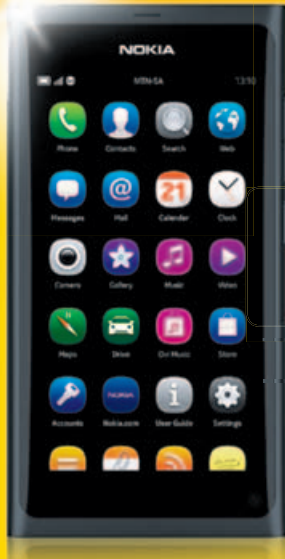
"You weren't there. I wasn't there. Let's allow these cases to be investigated by the ICD and let the prosecuting authority deal with it in the appropriate way," he said.

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