



TRC REPORT

All the latest

Today The Star begins a new weekly feature to keep you up to date with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. The feature, produced by our team of specialist TRC reporters and published every Friday, will provide all the background, the news and the insights you need to keep you in the picture as the dramatic story of our past unfolds.

Timol death still haunts his family and friends

By ROBERT BRAND

Ahmed Timol was not the first to die in detention, nor was he the last. But his death, still unexplained, continues to haunt his friends, his family and others who knew about his fate.

On Wednesday, October 27 1971 Timol plunged to his death from a window on the 10th floor of the security police headquarters at John Vorster Square, Johannesburg. The 30-year-old school teacher had been arrested five days before, and had admitted to his interrogators that he was a leading member of the local structures of the SA Communist Party.

Membership of the party, which was banned, was a serious offence in terms of the security legislation. Nevertheless, Timol was not charged because police suspected that with some persuasion he could tell them much about his organisation's revolutionary plans. Instead, they interrogated him for five days until the day he died.

An inquest was held, and found nobody was to be blamed for Timol's death. Inquest magistrate JJL de Villiers accepted the police version of the incident despite a mass of evidence pointing to serious assaults and injuries sustained before the fatal plunge.

According to the police, Timol was being questioned by two security branch officers, Captain Johannes Gloy and Captain JZ van Niekerk. Up to that point he had been treated fairly and had not been assaulted, police said.

During the questioning, a salary clerk, Sergeant Joao Rodriguez, entered the 10th floor office together with a police informer identified only as Mr X. Mr X informed Gloy and Van Niekerk that one of Timol's code-named associates had been identified. Timol appeared greatly distressed when he heard this, Gloy told the inquest. Gloy and Van Niekerk departed to talk in private with Mr X, leaving Timol with Rodriguez.

Rodriguez testified that he was sitting with his back to the window, with Timol on the opposite side of a table. Timol - Rodriguez referred to him throughout his testimony as "the Indian" - asked permission to go to the toilet. They both stood up, Rodriguez said, and the next moment "the Indian" was rushing around the table in the direction of the window. Before Rodriguez could get to him, he had opened the window and "dived through it".

Apart from the unlikely scenario of two senior officers leaving an important prisoner in the charge of a salary clerk, Timol's injuries appeared inconsistent with this story. He suffered a broken neck, fractured skull and a broken elbow and leg - injuries he could have been expected to sustain in a fall of more than 30m but his body was covered in bruises, scabs and scratches, and his left eye was swollen shut and gouged under the lid.

Some of these injuries, independent pathologist Dr Jonathan Gluckman found, were days old, sustained long before the fall. State pathologists agreed, but found that these injuries could have been sustained before Timol was arrested, and Magistrate de Villiers accepted their opinion.

Did Timol commit suicide? Was he deliberately thrown out of the window to hide the visible evidence of serious assaults?

Or, as has been claimed, did policemen accidentally drop him while holding him by his feet out of the window to scare him into talking?

We may never know, but some of the policemen who were there that day, including Gloy, are still alive. Johann Coetzee, who headed the Timol investigation and later became commissioner of police, is still alive.

They, and only they, can tell the true story.