



Last legs

Salim Essop demonstrates how Ahmed Timol, who was detained with him in 1971, had to be supported by two policemen the last time he saw him.

Go back

The Ditsong Museum in Pretoria will host an Ahmed Timol exhibition from July 5.

InSight History

Sunday Times

The death of Ahmed Timol, who fell from a window at John Vorster Square, was an apartheid travesty. Now his family hope to set the record straight

The ghost of room 1026

By **Tymon Smith**
Smith@sundaytimes.co.za



LONG WAIT FOR JUSTICE Ahmed Timol; John Vorster Square, from which he plunged to his death in 1971; and his funeral. Pictures: ahmedtimol.co.za



Ahmed Timol with his mother, Hawa

'When can I see my son?'

Rand Daily Mail, Friday October 29 1971:

The dreadful nightmare that engulfs the Timol family of Roodepoort took on its full intensity from 4pm on Tuesday.

This was exactly 24 hours before 30-year-old schoolteacher Ahmed Timol fell to his death from the 10th-floor office at John Vorster Square Police Station, Johannesburg.

On Tuesday at 4pm four white plain-clothed policemen arrived at Flat 2, 76 Mare Street, Roodepoort, the Timols' home.

It was, Mr and Mrs Timol will tell you, the eighth time policemen had searched the flat since their son Ahmed had been detained last Friday night.

Mrs Timol yesterday recalled the following dialogue between her and the policemen on Tuesday afternoon.

Mrs Timol: "When can I see my son again?"

Police: "You won't see your son again."

Mrs Timol: "Why won't I see my son again?"

Police: "He needs a hiding."

Mrs Timol: "I've never hurt my son, so you must not hit him."

Police: "Because you didn't hit him, we will hit him."

Dr Salim Essop, 67, small, lively and loquacious, is standing in the passage outside office 1013 in what is now the operational response section at Johannesburg Central police station. Two officers of the court hold him on either side so he can recreate for Judge Billy Mothe, sitting in a storage room at the back of the office, what he believes was the last glimpse he had of his friend and comrade Ahmed Timol 46 years ago, a day before Timol plunged to his death from a window on the 10th floor of what was then John Vorster Square.

"Hold me higher up, slow down, he was barely moving, just dragging his feet, like this," says Essop.

Earlier in the day Essop had concluded his testimony of torture and abuse at the hands of the notorious Security Branch after he and Timol were arrested at a roadblock at 11pm on Friday October 22 1971. Now he is doing his best to help the court during the in loco inspection of the building that served for almost three decades as the "pinnacle of torture chambers" during the apartheid regime.

Reminding Mothe that Timol was wearing a hood, he brings his dead friend to life as well as memory and circumstances will allow. Essop never saw Timol alive again and only found out about his death months after their arrest. By the time he glimpsed Timol being led down the corridor outside "the vault", where he had endured three days of torture and sleep and food deprivation, Essop was close to death, bruised, battered and exhausted. On Tuesday October 26 1971 he collapsed and was taken to hospital. He would not find out what had happened to Timol until March the following year.

The in loco inspection was the culmination of two days of evidence given by Essop during the reopening of the inquest into

Timol's death. Essop, who served a "five-year parking ticket [sentence] on Robben Island" and has lived outside South Africa since 1981, did not give evidence about his own torture during the first inquest into Timol's death that was held in 1972.

In that inquest, Magistrate JL de Villiers found that no one was to blame. He accused Timol's mother, Hawa – who died in 1996 – of being a dishonest witness and accepted the police's version of events. They

said Timol had committed suicide after being confronted by evidence presented to him by a mysterious "Mr X", whose identity could not be revealed for "reasons of national security".

The reopening of the inquest followed a 45-year struggle by the Timol family to have the original inquest's findings reversed. Most of the security policemen involved in Timol's arrest and interrogation are dead and so Essop's testimony will be key in helping Mothe decide what really happened in the days and hours before Timol's death.

It was an emotional journey for Essop as he recounted his four-day ordeal at the hands of men for whom torture "was just a sport" and during which he went from being a third-year medical student, a "life-loving, fashionable young man" who hated apartheid and had never been punched in his life, to being suffocated with a plastic bag and tortured with electric shocks. He fell unconscious on the floor of room 1013 and came to with his interrogators urinating on him; finally he slipped into a coma, "near death".

As the pack of journalists with their video cameras, smartphones and digital recorders hurry after the judge and lawyers as they leave the room, I pause to study what now serves as a space showcasing photographs taken at police training and sports events. Then I peer into the storage room, scene of historical horrors for so many years, now stacked with banal cleaning products and stationery.

In room 1026, the policewoman who has helpfully moved out

her desk to allow for the reconstruction of Timol's last moments, tells us that until two weeks ago she had no idea that someone had died after falling out the window of her office 46 years ago. While the judge, irritated by the obstruction of the inspection by the too-large media pack, kicks us out into the corridor, another police officer tells me that there are those who report that when you work the nightshift on the 10th floor you can still hear the ghost of Timol haunting the corridors.

The current investigation may not be able to establish exactly what happened on that Wednesday afternoon in 1971 but, thanks to the testimony of Essop and other former detainees, it will allow Mothe to bring some closure to the family if he finds it was highly unlikely that Timol was in any condition to be sitting "sipping coffee" with his interrogators before flinging himself out of the window. As the family's lawyer, Advocate Howard Varney, says, De Villiers "bought this untidy brew of falsehoods hook, line and sinker. It will be our submission that the magistrate, in his rush to

exonerate the police, was unable or unwilling to discern fact from fiction."

Whether the inquest outcome will lay Timol's ghost to rest on the 10th floor remains to be seen – but this, the first apartheid-era case to be reopened in this way, marks a significant step in redressing what Varney sees as a failure by the post-apartheid government, which had "largely abandoned the Timol family and so many other families of victims of apartheid-era atrocities".

He says: "Why did they have to wait 45 years for this day? Why have the promises of our constitutional compact to victims not been met? Why have virtually all the cases from the past been abandoned by the authorities? Why did the Timol family have to move heaven and earth to get this inquest off the ground?"

* The Timol inquest is scheduled to continue at the High Court in Johannesburg from July 24 to August 4 and to conclude at the High Court in Pretoria on August 10 and 11.

Why did they have to wait 45 years for this day?

Howard Varney
Family lawyer

