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FORMER VLAKPLAAS OPERATIVES REVEAL SECRET UNIT

Retired police commissioner Johan van der Merwe's surprise disclosure, that the order to blow up Khotso House in 1988 came from former president PW Botha, has overshadowed another revelation by two former security policemen - one with more sinister implications.

The two policemen told for the first time this week of a secret intelligence unit operating outside the law, and with the sanction of the now-defunct State Security Council, which targeted prominent and "troublesome" activists inside and outside the country for elimination.

Former Vlakplaas security police base commander Brig Jack Cronje and Col Roelof Venter said activists were eliminated because taking them to court would have been too much trouble and would not have provided a "permanent solution".

This was in spite of the fact that South Africa at the time had some of the most repressive laws in the world which allowed the police to detain people at will for indefinite periods.

"It was necessary to act outside the confines of the legal system," Cronje told the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's amnesty committee. "The object was to protect the state and the National Party so the state would not be overthrown by the liberation movements."

Cronje and Venter, who are among five policemen who have applied for amnesty for more than 40 murders, testified that a secret counter-revolutionary intelligence target centre was set up in 1985 as another cog in the NP government's elaborate security apparatus.

Its purpose was to draw up a priority list of activists who it was felt could not be dealt with by the normal processes of law. This selection process took place at monthly meetings attended by representatives of Military Intelligence, the Special Forces, national intelligence and the security police.

"If they were not eliminated they would not be permanently neutralised by security legislation, detention and the normal legal system," Cronje said.

"The legal system was not equipped to deal with these situations and to counter the soldiers of the ANC, SACP and PAC."

His description of the secret unit, known by its Afrikaans acronym Trewits, was eerily reminiscent of the so-called Star Chamber, a State tribunal established during the reign of England's King Edward IV in 1487.

The chamber, named after a room in Westminster Palace, was initially set up to deal with civil disputes between subjects. However, by 1540 it had changed character. Like Trewits, it began to operate outside the country's legal system.

It was charged with trying offences against the government, unhampered by the ordinary rules of law. Under King Charles I the chamber, staffed by royal councillors and chief justices, was used by the king and his party to persecute opponents.

After 154 years in existence, the chamber was finally dissolved by Parliament in 1641 after a Bill was passed to abolish what was seen as an "oppressive" extra-judicial mechanism.

While the history books give a date for the abolition of the chamber, Cronje and Venter were unable to tell the amnesty committee when and if Trewits had stopped operating.

In justifying the decision to set up Trewits, the two men spoke repeatedly of the "full-scale guerilla war" that erupted after the United Democratic Front, then the internal wing of the ANC, was established in 1983.

"The government's approach was that there was a total onslaught and we were involved in a war," Cronje testified. "During this period the country was infiltrated by activists who tried to make the country ungovernable.

"Their actions had to be countered by the SA Police. They were forced to act in a way that was not in line with normal conduct in times of peace.

"To prosecute a person through the normal court structure was sometimes totally impossible. There was no other choice but to... eliminate them."

Cronje, commander of Vakplaas's C10 unit from 1983 to 1985, said Trewits initially concentrated on identifying suspected ANC bases in neighbouring states, but later included targets inside the country.

He said it was possible that the instruction to kill KwaNdebele Cabinet minister Piet Ntuli came from Trewits, which was under the overall command of Maj-Gen Jac Buchner, later to become commissioner of the KwaZulu Police.

According to Venter, operations outside South Africa's borders were carried out by members of Special Forces, who specialised in covert actions of that kind.

Both Cronje and Venter stressed that Trewits operated with the full knowledge of the government's State Security Council, then under the chairmanship of PW Botha.

In a joint statement read out at the beginning of the amnesty hearing, the five former policemen said they "seriously doubted" statements by Botha's successor, FW de Klerk, that he had never been party to any decision by the Cabinet, SSC or any committee in the authorising gross human rights violations.

They called on the NP to admit authorising actions "outside the normal processes of law".

Cronje testified that reports on his unit's activities were sent daily to police headquarters. "Every incident of the previous day was mentioned in the report. If an activist was killed or his house burnt, that information would have been passed on to head office and discussed by the Sanhedrin (heads of department).

"It was my understanding that the reports would be sent on to the State Security Council."

Although it now appears likely these reports were destroyed on the eve of the 1994 elections, the testimony of the two policemen goes a long way in establishing the chain of command for such covert actions.

More importantly, their testimony establishes a definite link, through the SSC, between the political leadership of the NP and gross human rights violations perpetrated by the security forces.

As a result, de Klerk is expected to face tough questioning when he and other political party leaders are recalled by the Truth Commission to answer queries on their parties' submissions made earlier this year.

With the hearings only scheduled for early next year, the coming months are likely to be an uncomfortable waiting period for the NP.

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