



Driving **trucks** *in* **Soweto**

With the current spate of crime and violence, what's it like to be a truck driver, out on the road daily? A group of drivers, working for a furniture retailer, tell their story to SNUKI ZIKALALA.

Shootings, hijacking at gun point, and stone throwing are what we are experiencing on a daily basis when we deliver in Soweto. Our lives are always in danger. There is just a sigh of relief when we return from delivery without any incident.

It has become very difficult to deliver in the black townships. Over the last three years, Soweto youths have hijacked three trucks at gun point from us. We are just lucky that we are still alive. It has become the norm that when we deliver in Soweto we have to be heavily protected by armed security guards. We ourselves feel as if we are caged in, as one security guard is in the front seat and the other outside. Their duty and responsibility is to defend us and the

employers' property when we are attacked.

It all started about three years ago, during the height of political struggle. The youth, which was by then leading the struggle against apartheid, has now turned its anger against anything that comes from the cities to their townships. It is really unbelievable. Before, we always felt safe when entering Soweto. Parents would meet us with open hearts and we felt safe in the townships. We used to be happy when we were doing deliveries to the townships. After a hard day's work we would drive to a shebeen and quench our thirst. But now, one has to drive out of Soweto immediately and thank God for getting out of the lion's den alive.

Targets of criminals

Unlike workers in factories, our working conditions are very abnormal. Had it not been because of scarcity of work and mass unemployment, we would have long left this company.

Children in the townships have become animals. They do not respect nor fear death anymore. They call our delivery trucks targets. And yet these are goods that are being bought by their parents for household use.

The first experience of hijacking was when we had gone to deliver in Dube, in Soweto. We had just parked outside the house, preparing to offload the furniture, when four youths appeared carrying heavy weapons. They pointed their guns and demanded the truck keys. We had no

alternative but to give them the keys. They drove off with the truck. It was never seen again. We were lucky that we escaped without incident.

The second occasion was six months later after we had escaped a number of ambushes. This time they blocked our truck with another car, pointed their weapons and demanded that we should go out of the truck. We had to oblige and scuttled for our lives.

Do security guards help?

Management felt we should be protected – actually that their trucks and commodities should be protected – and decided to hire armed security. It was strange and abnormal. Initially we were safe, but now we are just human targets.

Guns are just floating in Soweto; apparently every young kid has a weapon. And their targets are now the security guards and the delivery vans.

We once had to run for our lives when unknown gunmen opened fire on us. We had just stopped and were offloading the furniture when we heard gun shots. The security returned the fire. It was Lebanon. We ducked and threw ourselves on the ground. The exchange lasted about three minutes. We were lucky we escaped unhurt.

We think the aim was just to scare the security guards and then to take their fire arms. The shooting was directed towards them and the

attackers thought they would run away and leave us unprotected. But the poor fellows had to stick it out until the youths disappeared.

Stone throwing

Another element is stone throwing. Stones are just thrown on our truck as we pass some of the most dangerous areas, like Diepkloof in Zone 2. We think they are directed towards the security guards.

Is it not shocking that life has become abnormal? High unemployment, lack of respect for human life, is what you see in the townships. We really do not know where we are leading to.

Life becomes impossible when the schools are closed; you find groups of youths hanging around corners. Since they are unemployed and they are on holiday, the only thing they think of is mischief.

During the holidays it is next to impossible to deliver in Soweto. Idling youths block the streets with stones, with the hope that the truck driver will stop to remove them. Most of the time we are saved by parents who warn us in advance about possible problems in a certain area.

Property is more important than our lives

What is really disappointing and disturbing is that our management is more concerned about the loss of property. We will always be told we should look after the truck and the goods that we

are to deliver.

It is so agonising and frustrating when we come back without the truck and the goods. We go through a mill. The management will interrogate us thoroughly. We will have to write a long statement, while being in a state of shock and despair.

The way we are interrogated! At times we feel that we should have died during the hijacking. We know of companies that fired drivers when their trucks were hijacked. What is disturbing is that most of the time management puts the blame on us. It is as if we are responsible for the hijacking and taking of the goods from the trucks. We are victims from both ends.

Will this end soon?

We do not think the situation will get better. The problem is that we are being harassed by educationally disadvantaged and unemployed youths. These children have no respect for human lives. To them it is just a game.

They are not aware that their parents are the ones who will suffer. If we refuse to deliver in Soweto, parents will be forced to fetch the furniture from the stores, which are in the centre of Johannesburg.

We do not think that hijacking and stone throwing will end very soon. We are victims of circumstances. And we have no alternative but to brave it out. ☆