

# Heroes' Journey

## Ex-combatants and life-changing experience

Liberation movements' former combatants are a neglected group. **Lephophotho Mashike** investigates their plight, their psychological state and their survival strategies. He also explores the impact of an eco-healing therapy.

The transition from apartheid to democracy was the result not of the seizure of power through military means, but of a negotiated settlement. Due to the peaceful nature of the transition, South Africa is rarely understood as a post-conflict country. Consequently, there has never been any serious attempt to identify or effectively address the wide range of needs of the different former combatants' groups, especially former members of the guerrilla forces and paramilitary formations.

'Former combatants' refers to former members of such organisations as Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK), the African National Congress' liberation army, the Azanian People's Liberation Army (APLA), the Azanian National Liberation Army (Azanla), paramilitary formations such as the Self Defence Units (SDUs) and the Bontehuwel Military Wing. The concept is also used in reference to the Inkatha Freedom Party's Self Protection Units (SPUs).

One of the issues that was ignored during South Africa's transition to democracy was the impact of the trauma experienced during armed conflict on the lives of former combatants. This manifests itself in many ways including feelings of

guilt or shame about involvement in acts of violence. To deal with these problems, ex-combatants often rely and abuse drugs and alcohol. Without professional treatment these psychological problems could cause problems to former combatants' families and communities.

Another problem is that most former combatants are economically worse off than the rest of the population. They suffer from high levels of unemployment. This is largely due to their lack of formal education and marketable skills since many went into exile or joined military structures before they finished their schooling. Despite the Recognition of Prior Learning system in South Africa, there has been no attempt to recognise the skills learnt in the military.

The lump sum demobilisation gratuities paid out on the release of some former guerrillas from the military have not been adequate to address their many needs. This was compounded by former combatants having limited skills in financial management. Furthermore, many of them did not qualify for the special pensions granted by the democratic government, for various reasons, but mainly because of age. Former combatants now find themselves

poor and unemployed in a society which applauds the material manifestation of wealth and success.

### ANGER AND CRIME

A combination of ex-combatants' guilt or shame about their involvement in acts of violence and the lack of recognition for their sacrifice, such as joining military structures before finishing school, has negative consequences. Many of them entered the transition period with an expectation of rewards for their contribution to the liberation of the country. However, even when their expectations were not met the former combatants continued to wait for rewards, and ultimately became angry.

By blaming political leaders and waiting for someone to address their problems, former combatants started to feel powerless. A combination of powerlessness and the view that they are entitled to rewards, has led former combatants into crime. A former MK combatant had this to say, "Since I am unemployed and struggling should I see an opportunity to get access to a safe in the local supermarket, I would ask for reinforcement from my friends to rob the supermarket of the money."

Some former SDU members felt



Coco Van Oppens

*Ex-combatants attend the Magalisberg eco-therapy wilderness trail.*

that the political situation of the late 1980s provided them with more economic opportunities than they have under democracy. As one former SDU member put it, "It was better during apartheid when we could still catch a target, at least we did not sleep on empty stomachs." The idea of 'catching a target' was common in the late 1980s, and referred to the practice of hijacking delivery vehicles belonging to white-owned companies as they entered the black townships.

It is worth noting that some ex-combatants are so desperate that they have considered working as hitmen. A former MK operative had the following to say, "You intellectuals (referring to the author) take out some expensive life insurance policies. Should your wife approach me and put R50 000 on the table and say, 'Here is R50 000 I want you to kill that man', I will do it even if I do not hold a grudge against you. This is a job that I can do very easily. How can I say no to R50 000 when I have nothing?"

The idea of working as hitmen is not an empty threat. Media reports have indicated that in both Gauteng and Western Cape provinces former APLA and MK combatants have been used as hitmen in the mini-bus taxi violence. While ex-combatants are not the cause of violent crime, they are vulnerable to being drawn in as role-players because of their skills, their social and economic exclusion and their political alienation.

Addressing the economic needs of former combatants alone, however, will not resolve the problems that they face. Apart from material benefits, there is a need to change their mindsets. As long as politicians are blamed or seen as being responsible for their situation, then combatants feel it is up to the politicians to resolve their situation. However, without taking ownership of their situation, former combatants will not be able to think creatively about solutions. They will indefinitely wait for someone else to fix their problems.

### CHANGING MINDSETS

One of the organisations that works towards changing the mindsets of former combatants who are trapped in a vicious circle of blame and powerlessness is the National Peace Accord Trust (NPAT).

The NPAT conducts eco-therapy wilderness trails at Matlapeng (Place of Stones) in the Magalisberg about 25 kilometres outside Rustenburg in the North West Province. The eco-therapy programme, also known as the Heroes' Journey, is a transformative, therapeutic process that takes place in the wilderness. The model involves assisting people to find balance, connection, guidance and healing by deepening their relationship with the natural environment. Group processes, individual reflection, symbols and rituals are used in an accessible wilderness setting to heighten people's awareness of the

connection between themselves, other people and the natural environment.

The most important part of the eco-trail is the solo-fast process in which all distractions are removed from the individual. Participants are required to enter the wilderness on their own, away from other participants and choose a spot in which to spend 24 hours alone. The place where participants spend time alone is known as a 'power spot' because people are expected to regain their personal power. During the 24-hour solo fast, participants have no access to food and can only take pure water. They are not allowed to take books, except note pads to write their thoughts. Cigarettes, newspapers, mobile phones, portable radios or any other daily conveniences are not allowed.

During the period participants are expected to reflect on their lives. This is done through prayer, meditation, singing (without distracting others) or just quietly processing thoughts and experiences. If a person comes back earlier, the process will still continue for them until the agreed time. This means that they will not be allowed to sleep or visit the lodge, talk to anyone or prepare any food until the entire group has returned and the facilitator signals that they can relax.

### SOME PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

For many participants, the solo-fast experience is the highlight of the

eco-therapy. They enjoy the solitude and the rebirth that is brought about by being in touch with the environment. This was reflected in participants' individual written reports, during post-solo circle discussions and in the post-trail interviews. For example one participant said, "During that time [solo fast] one chose a place that was full of traditional medicine and to me it was like one was connecting with the past generation which used to rely on those herbs and medicines. During this meditation and finding oneself, one was really in the past Africa. Modern as I am it was an eye-opening experience. It was good and a well-deserved process which lasted for twenty four hours."

During the pre-trail focus group interviews participants justified crime as a solution to unemployment amongst former combatants. However, during a post-trail interview a former SDU member who had earlier confessed his involvement in crime reported that the eco-trail helped him abandon crime. He further reported that he had approached some of his

victims and apologised for his deeds. The ability of a former criminal to take some initiative to apologise to his victims indicates that the solo fast gave power back to the participants. The NPAT eco-trail facilitators note that it is common for former combatants to denounce crime before they leave Matlapeng for home.

Four of the participants who were interviewed after returning from Matlapeng reported that the eco-trail is a good experience, which should be extended to many people including the unemployed. They all reported that given the life-changing experience of the eco-trail they would recommend it to anyone who is looking to change his/her life for the better. It is worth noting that all the participants argued that the whole experience of the eco-trail could go a long way to combating crime. This is because during the 24-hour solo fast participants get an opportunity to reflect on their lives and to make choices.

## CONCLUSION

While this report has referred to the potential for former combatants to

engage in crime, it is important not to stigmatise them as a 'social problem'. A number of ex-combatants who participated on the eco-therapy trails have reported that the experience gave them a new perspective on life and if they could get assistance they would contribute meaningfully to the development of the country.

An example is a 50 year old former MK combatant from Thokoza who is now a trained HIV/AIDS counsellor and is doing voluntary work in Thokoza, but feels that he needs more training around HIV/AIDS treatment. He is also passionate about working with mentally-challenged people. He reported his frustration after his attempt to open a shelter for mentally-challenged people in the township failed because some government officials sent him from pillar to post.

Former combatants with skills have to be identified and assisted in their attempts to contribute meaningfully to society. Business has to participate in programmes addressing the plight of former combatants. While some businesses are involved in the demilitarisation project of the Ekurhuleni Metropolitan Municipality, this is a drop in the ocean. More needs to be done and it does not require huge sums of money, as one former combatant puts it, 'we do not need millions of rands'. LB

*Lephophotho Mashike is a lecturer in the Department of Sociology at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. This article is based on ongoing research to evaluate the effectiveness of the National Peace Accord Trust's eco-therapy programme.*

Coco Van Oppens

