



ADDENDUM: GETTING THE KIDS TO SCHOOL: THE TRANSPORT CHALLENGE FOR LEARNERS IN SOUTH AFRICA

10 September 2007

As an addendum to the above-mentioned brief (dated 7 September 2007) that was distributed to Members of the Portfolio Committee on Transport, below is a copy of two newspaper reports of an accident that took place on Monday, 10 September in Port Elizabeth in which six primary school learners were killed.

Agony, outrage at kids' deaths¹

DAZED community members watched in horrified silence yesterday as paramedics sifted through the mangled wreck of a taxi in which six Port Elizabeth primary school children died after a horror smash allegedly caused by overloading and speeding.

Three more pupils – two of them siblings – were last night fighting for their lives in hospital, while the driver of the taxi was being treated at a secret location after an angry mob tried to gain access to him at Livingstone Hospital.



GRIM SCENE ... Pupils' school satchels lie abandoned in front of the taxi as police sift through the wreckage of the accident which claimed six lives. Pictures: JUDY DE VEGA

(Source: Spies, 2007)

¹ Spies, D. (2007) Agony, Outrage at Kids' Death, *The Herald*, 11 September.



He has been arrested on six counts of culpable homicide.

Last night more than 200 community members held a vigil at the site of the crash, which happened at 2.30pm on Stanford Road just before the bridge over Van der Kemp's Kloof in Bethelsdorp.

Police spokesman Captain Verna Brink said the taxi driver, Ralton van Rooyen, 25, lost control of the overloaded Toyota Quantum – carrying 22 pupils from Triomf Primary School when it was only registered to carry 15 – allegedly due to speeding.

"Six children between the ages of nine and 14 died at the scene, with one boy flung over the roof of a nearby house, landing in the backyard," she said.

Fourteen others were injured, three of them critically.

"Five children have since been released with minor cuts and bruises, but two children at Mercantile and one at Greenacres are in critical condition and may have to undergo brain surgery," she said.

Brink said the names of the children involved would not be released yet as the principal of Triomf first wanted to inform the school's pupils today.

Police and traffic officials blocked access to Stanford Road on both sides of the accident scene for at least three hours, causing major traffic jams as concerned parents and family rushed to the scene. Shocked residents and family members stared silently at the mangled wreckage of the taxi and the bodies of five children still at the crash site.

Some broke down in tears, while others called for retribution. One woman, who did not want to be named, sobbed as she told how one boy died in his brother's arms shortly after the accident.

"First, I held him in my arms, his body was broken but he was still breathing. I kept telling him to hold on, the ambulance is coming, the ambulance is on its way," she said.

"Then his brother came and took him in his arms, and that's where he died."

Off-duty paramedic Alfred Barends was travelling in the opposite direction when the accident happened, and rushed to help.

"The taxi was travelling at a hell of a speed as it came round the corner, overtaking another car on the barrier line," he said.

"I saw it wobble, then it fell on its side and slid across the oncoming lane before bouncing up over the pavement and slamming into the lamp post."

Barends said the post was ripped out by the impact. The taxi then rolled several times before coming to a halt.

"The driver and the 'guardtjie' jumped out of the taxi as soon as it started to roll, but the kids were left helpless.

"I watched as one girl was flung through the windscreen. There was nothing I could do."



Barends, who cut his foot on the wreckage trying to get to the girl, said she was dead by the time he reached her.

At Livingstone Hospital the mother of one of the girls who died, was helping her heavily bandaged son into the back of her car, apparently to take him to a private hospital as many other parents had done.

"Two of our family members were involved. There is a lot to deal with now," she said.

At Mercantile Hospital, a father whose two children were in high care, said the taxi was contracted to the school, and was used regularly to and from school by his children.

Several residents claimed taxi drivers often drank alcohol outside while waiting for schools to end. "I have often seen them sitting in their taxis drinking beer while they wait," one mother said.

Esmeralda du Plessis, whose 10-year-old nephew was injured in the crash, said her niece had told her that the driver was allegedly travelling at more than 170km/h.

"She saw the speed because she was sitting behind him," the aunt said.

ANC ward councillor for Gelvandale, Pieter Hermaans, who also witnessed the accident, said overloaded taxis were a great concern.

"We need to do something about this. We need to find a way of stopping this, like introducing a by-law that will allow us to confiscate taxis that are overloaded," he said.

Triomf school governing body member Rodger Vasson said the deaths were a tragedy. "We need to address the problem of transport at these schools. If it means getting buses in, we must do it. We simply cannot have more children dying needlessly like this."

Just last month police expressed concerns over taxi drivers who overload their vehicles. Officers had been instructed by the traffic offences court to arrest any driver who exceeded the capacity of a vehicle by four or more passengers.

A taxi driver was arrested on August 14 and his vehicle impounded after he was found to be carrying 39 schoolchildren, seven of them sitting in the front passenger seat.

A vigil was held at the accident scene late last night, with more than 200 residents from the surrounding areas saying prayers for the children who died or were injured.

Eastern Cape Safety and Security MEC Thobile Mhlahlo will meet the families of the victims at the Gelvandale Police Station today at 11am.



Six pupils die as taxi rolls²

Six schoolchildren died and 15 were injured - two of them critically - when their taxi rolled at Bethelsdorp on Monday afternoon, said Eastern Cape traffic authorities.

Officials suspect the driver was speeding when he lost control of the minibus and it overturned at 2.20pm, about a kilometre from Triomf Primary School where he had picked up the pupils after school.

Witnesses saw the vehicle roll, then hit a lamp-post before careening down an embankment.

Five children died on impact, said Eastern Cape traffic spokesman Tshepo Machaea. A sixth was flung over the roof of a house. His body was later found in the backyard. Another 15 pupils were hurt.

"Two of the children were placed onto emergency life support," said Netcare 911 spokesperson Nick Dollman.

"They were intubated³ and manually ventilated by the paramedics and were in a critical condition," he said.

"Nine children sustained serious injuries and three had minor injuries."

The driver was also taken to hospital in a serious condition, but the conductor was not hurt.

Although there were 23 people on board the 15-seater vehicle, traffic officials said they had yet to determine whether the taxi was overloaded.

Seating limits referred to adult occupation. The Road Traffic Act specified a calculation which had to be done to determine the maximum number of child passengers.

The children were aged between nine and 14.

The injured were taken to the Livingstone, Mercantile, Green Acres and St George's hospitals in and around Port Elizabeth.

An official said post mortems would be conducted on Tuesday morning, after which the bodies would be identified by their parents.

The Eastern Cape's safety, liaison, roads and transport MEC Thobile Mhlanhlo would be there to support the families.

² Sapa (2007) Six Pupils Die as Taxi Rolls, Independent Online, 10 September. [Internet]. Available at: http://www.iol.co.za/index.php?set_id=1&click_id=181&art_id=nw20070910205945783C775480

³ To put a ventilation tube into a hollow cavity, usually an airway.