

Young Communist League trains Swazi recruits

Member of secret army claims ideological and military instruction was given by alliance partners

Michael Schmidt

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The children playing happily in the school-yard of Tonga View Primary School in the Nkomazi district of Mpumalanga belie the use of their classrooms for the training of an alleged guerrilla army.

The Saturday Star was taken to the school by a young Swaziland Youth Congress (Swayoco) member of 12 years' standing, who claimed he and fellow trainees of the secret army — Swaziland Liberation — had received ideological training there from ANC tripartite alliance militants.

His claim was supported by the man who organised the political education sessions, Young Communist League (YCL) district chairperson Godfrey Sibiya — though Sibiya denied any knowledge that his Swazi students were being trained to wage war.

Previous rumours, circulating in 1999, of the formation of a Swazi guerrilla army proved insubstantial.

But intense frustration among Swayoco and its parent body, the outlawed opposition People's United Democratic Movement (Pudemo), with lack of progress by the monarchy on real reforms — and with the international community's view of Swaziland as a "cultural museum" showcasing bare-breasted maidens — has seen calls for a more radical approach.

The young man, who claimed he was risking being killed for breaking Swaziland Liberation's strict code of silence, swears that guerrilla training camps, mostly in the Nkomazi district of Mpumalanga — a rough square bordered by the Kruger National Park to the north, Mozambique to the east and Swaziland to the south — were run by "commanders" armed with pistols and AK-47s.

Some commanders were Swazis, he said, but others hailed from further afield, including Kenya, and several were from the Mozambican National Resistance (Renamo).

Swaziland Liberation was, the man said, organised on a highly mobile cellular basis, with groups of between four and six trainees, each under a commander, rotated frequently between several safe houses in the Nkomazi district.

During his training, he was moved between four safe houses in the settlements of Driekoppies, Kamhlanga, Nanzi and an unknown location on a river in Limpopo.

Trainees were not allowed any interaction with their neighbours and relied on intermediaries to bring them food and water in their spartanly furnished safe houses. They spent between five days and two weeks in each location before being moved to a new safe house at night.

Training in the dense thorn bush and hills of Nkomazi allegedly included bushcraft, physical fitness, moving under fire, and guerrilla tactics — and later, the use of firearms. Trainees were allegedly even forced to dig pit latrines for the local community in order to raise the funds needed to buy pistols.

The trainees were told that the liberation struggle had entered its “rush-hour” — Pudemo aims at the eradication of the tinkhundla chieftaincy by 2008 — and that they would have to be prepared to kill.

Speaking to the Saturday Star in his humble corrugated-iron-roofed shack in the heart of Swaziland, the young farmer-turned-militant — whose identity we will not reveal in order to protect him — said he had been deeply concerned that in the face-to-face confrontations the guerrillas expected to have with the police and armed forces, innocent bystanders might be killed.

He said that every two weeks, the trainee cells were brought together over the weekend in a classroom at the Tonga View Primary School opposite the Tonga District Hospital where, numbering 50 in all, they met with about six Cosatu members led by Sibiya and were given political education in Marxism and on the pressing demands of the “rush-hour”.

Sibiya, who works at the National Education Health and Allied Workers’ Union offices in Nelspruit and heads a 1 000-strong YCL district body, admitted to the Saturday Star that he hosted these “socialist forum political schools”, arranged housing and assisted in the political asylum applications of Swayoco refugees.

This was all in line with the YCL’s and Cosatu’s international solidarity resolutions, which, Foreign Affairs spokesperson Ronnie Mamoepe said, was within their lawful rights. But, Sibiya stressed: *“I’m not aware of any Swaziland Liberation army.”*

Recruited by Swayoco at the age of 18, the young man said he had become radicalised by his experiences working for the Swazi government as an anti-malarial sprayer, during which time he witnessed the luxurious lifestyles of the elite.

He said Swaziland Liberation had its origins in self-defence squads within Swayoco — to protect its meetings and marches from attack by the Royal Swazi Police.

However, our source claimed, this formation soon took on an offensive aspect, being responsible for a series of petrol-bombings across the kingdom last December and in January, for which 16 Pudemo and Swayoco militants are now facing treason charges.

Our source said: *“I was in the campaign when planning the bombings. I was there and supported it ... but I later realised it was not right [because] people got scared and relied on the government to protect them from this ‘threat’.”*

Although Pudemo president Mario Masuku said *“I can’t say that the bombings were an official act of the organisation”*, he admitted they had raised the profile of Pudemo.

He said Pudemo *“has not resolved to go on guerrilla warfare”*, adding *“I may not now say we have formally formed a liberation army. I won’t officially say it ... On the issue of clear guerrilla warfare and combat, we have not pronounced on it — as yet.”*

As for Swaziland Liberation’s alleged aim of assassinating tinkhundla chiefs, Masuku said: *“It is not our intention to go to the level of extinguishing certain structures of the government — as long as the power has been devolved to the people, we may still have chiefs there.”*

Among Pudemo's main allies — whom Masuku praised at a Chris Hani Institute seminar on Pudemo strategy two weeks ago for their support — are the ANC, the SACP, both their youth wings, and Cosatu.

A Cosatu member who quizzed Masuku about the revolutionary timetable for Swaziland was ignored.

Cosatu spokesperson Patrick Craven said: *"I know nothing; obviously, something like that would not be publicised."*

He said Cosatu was close to the Swaziland Solidarity Network, and displayed its support through actions like its April blockade of Swaziland's borders.

An SACP resolution calling for the "overthrow of the neo-colonial and semi-feudal" Swazi government by the imposition of smart sanctions and "the intensification of resistance" by Pudemo was endorsed by 40 communist and workers' parties at an international congress in Lisbon this month.

Pudemo's latest draft strategy document, The Road Map Towards a New and Democratic Swaziland, mentions a new tactic to be used to break the current deadlocked balance of forces and hasten the royal government's "funeral".

The substance of the new tactic is hinted at in the map, which says Pudemo is looking at the examples of four countries that fought guerrilla wars: Namibia, Zimbabwe, Mozambique and Chile.

The map's "strategic liberation plan" calls for the building of "a new and organised force for liberation that captures the imagination of the oppressed masses and inspires them to action".

The young man said Swaziland Liberation trainees were told that their objective, once trained as "soldiers", was a total revolution, including the overthrow of King Mswati III and the establishment of a republic with Masuku as president, though Masuku said the people themselves would have to decide whether they wanted to retain the monarch in a figurehead role.

Still, Masuku said Pudemo was "a revolutionary organisation, not a reformist organisation" and its aim was to "eradicate the tinkhundla system and replace it with a democratic formation".

Masuku echoed a telling phrase in the document when he said: *"What cannot be won on the battlefield cannot be won on the negotiating table."*

The map is up for discussion at Pudemo's sixth national congress, to be held from December 14 to 17 — a congress at which, our source claims, representatives of Swaziland Liberation will be present.

Masuku said *"any thinking towards the advancement of our struggle will be debated at the congress"*, while hinting that a force like Swaziland Liberation may operate fairly autonomously: when Pudemo was on the march, he said, *"we don't tell the people how fast to march"*.

The road map states that Pudemo's *"chosen path is to destroy and bury tinkhundla so that on its ashes we can build a truly democratic Swaziland"*.

Muntu Phillip Mswane, Swaziland's high commissioner to South Africa, would only say that Swazis were "so inter-related" that anyone engaging in armed struggle would "find that the one you bury is your relative".

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