

Honouring the Sharpeville Dead

Tuesday 10 November 2009

SHARPEVILLE symbolises the struggle against apartheid, being the township that drew the world's attention to the plight of black South Africans after the tragedy of March 1960.

Former president Nelson Mandela signed into law the country's ground-breaking constitution a stone's throw away from where the former South African police killed 69 people and injured another 180, shooting many of them in the back.

March 21, 2010 marks the 50th anniversary of that watershed day in South Africa's history.

Says the Executive Mayor of the Sedibeng District Municipality, Mahole Simon Mofokeng: "The first funeral, during which 34 people were buried, was held nine days after the massacre and attended by around 3000 people. Last rites were delivered in Sharpeville Square before proceeding to the cemetery. The second funeral took place on April 2, 1960 and in attracting 3500 mourners, followed the same ritual.

"However, the funerals had "an added tragic dimension" as initially the government refused to allow non-residents – or foreigners as defined by apartheid geographic and ethnographic logic – to be buried in the Phelindaba cemetery."

After pressure from local leaders, the department of bantu administration and development allowed the foreigners to be buried but with one key caveat – they would not be recorded in the official Native Cemetery Register. Consequently, only 56 names appeared on the register with the remaining 13 held as perpetually anonymous.

Consequently, the Municipality has identified upgrading the Phelindaba cemetery as one of the immediate projects within the broader development initiative for the region. In developing the Sharpeville heritage hub, focus will be on the memorial site and museum, the old police station, the community hall, library and churches and the cemetery.

In terms of the upgrade, the municipality envisions investing in the access roads, parking areas, ablution facilities, a peace park, designated entry point to the cemetery, an outdoor exhibition area and a defined pathway marking out the graves of the 69 people killed on March 21, 1960.

"The cemetery exhibition will tell the story of the aftermath of Sharpeville and other massacres and the ways in which funerals became increasingly important political rallying points for communities. The memorial garden will be a soft, landscaped circular space providing a place of respite with shade and comfort for those coming to honour the dead," says Mofokeng.

Sedibeng district was established in 2000 on the rich history of Evaton, Heidelberg, Sharpeville, Boipatong, Sebokeng, Vereeniging, Vanderbijlpark, Vaal Oewers, Vaal Marina and Suikerbosrand.



A proposal has been submitted to the Emfuleni municipality for upgrading the roads leading to the cemetery, while in the pipeline are plans to upgrade the rest of the cemetery by creating pathways, landscaping, creating above-ground burials and parks.

However, Mofokeng says, throughout history art has been used as a means for expressing social and political conflict and issues and the Sharpeville upgrade will incorporate investment into public art. Linking the cemetery, George Thabe soccer stadium, traffic circle and Sharpeville hall will be commissioned art correspondingly honouring the dead, reflecting the constitution signing, constitution story and the Sharpeville legends.

Markers will be placed through the public art space to honour different massacres from the region and a wall of names is being considered. A stakeholder process will produce a list of the massacres the local communities want commemorated in the garden as well as input on the specific plants and symbols to be included.

Consideration will be given to configuring the garden in line with the specific rituals the local communities may employ within its space.

Sedibeng Executive Mayor believes the Sharpeville heritage node was “a highly significant site being the place where one of the most seminal events in South African history took place”. The 50th anniversary provides the incentive to improve the district such that it becomes an arena heralding the significance of Sharpeville and providing an outstanding experience for anyone wishing to learn more about South Africa’s dark past.

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