Informal trader beaten by JMPD officers

Physical abuse, bribery and xenophobia evident in Operation Clean Sweep

On the afternoon of Friday 22 November 2013, Johannesburg Metropolitan Police Department (JMPD) officials assaulted and arrested a number of informal traders in the inner city of Johannesburg. A female trader from Mozambique, who is currently represented by SERI, witnessed the assaults and was subsequently beaten and arrested. Below is an account of the incident drawn from her statement. She remains anonymous as she will be laying charges against the police and fears being victimised. We refer to her below as “Belinda”.

On Friday at around 12:00 Belinda and a group of other traders were approached near Kerk Street by more than 30 JMPD officers. Belinda saw JMPD officials chasing people away and taking bribes. Belinda also saw them assault another female trader by kicking her with booted feet. She took photographs of both these incidents on her cell phone. Another female trader reported being hit, slapped and sworn at by the police.

The JMPD officers approached Belinda, who took the photos, and confiscated her cell phone, saying that “she was making as if she is a journalist” and must go home. When Belinda approached them to ask for her phone back, they told her that she was under arrest because “it is illegal to take photos of the police doing their job”.

They took her into their police van, where approximately 20 officers beat her and pulled out most of her hair (see photos below). They took photos of Belinda without her hair and made fun of her. A female officer eventually gave her back her cell phone, with which she continued taking photos of the violent assaults on traders. The police took her phone once again and deleted the photos.

The police then drove around with Belinda and a number of other arrested traders, and she witnessed JMPD officers confiscating mannequins outside a clothing shop, and the owner paying money to the officials to return them. Eventually they were driven to the JMPD station at Faraday Street where they were handcuffed with their hands behind their backs, spat on and further verbally and physically assaulted.

Throughout this ordeal, the traders were subject to xenophobic abuse. One trader was told that that the JMPD “would drag her with the car like the other guy from Maputo”. Belinda was told that “all of this is Mandela’s fault for having married Graca”.

The traders were driven to Johannesburg Central Police Station where they were charged with “resisting arrest”. Eventually an ambulance was called to take them to the Hillbrow Community Health Care Centre, where they were given pain medication. Prosecutors later declined to press charges. SERI will be instituting damages claims against the JMPD and the City of Johannesburg in due course.
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Photos: A female informal trader’s hair was pulled out by JMPD officers.