When the Police PRO met the Pressmen

Police PRO Colonel Leon Mellet met the foreign Press yesterday to explain the decision to screen newsmen intent on going into Soweto and neighbouring black areas to cover the current disturbances. This is an edited transcript of what followed. (JOURNALIST, as in the tag-line below, obviously applies to different questioners.)

Lt-Col Leon Mellet ... talking to the Press

JOURNALIST: Colonel, I'm from CBS and there is some question of networks using '76 footage and claiming it is modern day footage. Did you make that point?

MELLET: Yes, we believe I haven't got evidence to this effect but we believe at this moment and this is what information I could be given and this is only information, I have no evidence to this effect. But this is what has been taking place. That '76 Soweto footage has been used overseas and also as I pointed out this morning that also a parade of military vehicles, of heavy vehicles, on the 13th of May. The footage of those TV reports in fact fitted with the with the present situation and in fact in certain areas overseas it has been made out that we are now using the Defence Force with all that heavy gear to try and control the situation.

JOURNALIST: You are making some very broad accusations. Could you at least identify the country. You are showing a full world wide threat without identifying. Which country, sir.

JOURNALIST: Look it has already been reported on the radio this morning, the 9.30 news. Five minutes after you left his office it is being reported as a statement of fact. Foreign broadcasting organisations are using Soweto riots '76, pretending they are happening now.

MELLET: I'm not saying . . .

JOURNALIST: Could you issue a statement identifying those foreign countries?

(General confusion with questions fired at Col Mellet. Laughter and talk among the journalists.)

ELLET: We took some of the al Pressman into Soweto on our and they can all tell you at they saw and it became ry evident to us that at the ment the troublemakers are ly awaiting cameramen and essmen.

We ended up at a place in ordgesig where a couple of ndred of the youths had been the area since early this rning.

That is where they last night ted the shops and as soon as stopped it was very evident t within a couple of minutes would have had a riotous uation on our hands.

And for this reason I would e to ask some of the Pressn who accompanied us into t area what they saw. Mar, could you explain to the ople, perhaps?

URNALIST: Well I can just l them what I have seen and at not.

We were around and the only dence that something had ppened was the glass in cerin spots. Then at a specific nt where, when we arrived re, they were looking and y saw the police they turned ir eyes backwards.

When they saw us in the rs, in the cars behind, and st probably the cameras and porters, they began to sing ir songs and dance and clap ir hands and shout.

That's all. And then the mont that we took off it calmed wn again.

ELLET: As I said, the Pressn that accompanied us, they all here and you can ask m all. They will all bear us t.

URNALIST: In the Commisner's statement — all this ff about foreign Press incitblacks to riot — he said t members of the South Afan Press have identified mbers of the foreign Press clenching their fists, shout"Amandla", in fact causing itement.

Now, I presume that memrs of the South African Press o reported that are here. I nder if they can identify the eign Press who are responsi if the foreign Press are re?

s that possible?

MELLET: I can just say that shortly after our Press conference this morning I had a look at a video recording that the British took and there it was very obvious.

Unfortunately it is not possible from the actual film to identify the actual newsmen but there it was very obvious that at the church in Regina Mundi where it was fairly obvious that a newsman with his television camera slung over his shoulder gave a black power salute and started off a rioriotous situation within a matter of seconds.

And that we have on video casette.

JOURNALIST: Can we see that film? I am sure we can identify the man.

MELLET: I doubt whether you will be able to identify the man.

JOURNALIST: We can try.

MELLET: I can assure you that is, that is how, how . . .

JOURNALIST: Can I come back to my original question?

There are members of the South African Press who have complained about this specific thing, now, if there are any members of the South African Press who did contact the police, can they now attempt to identify any one of the foreign Press who they say is responsible?

Is there anybody here who complained to the Press, sorry, the police. Was it Afrikaans Press or South African Press?

MELLET: No, it was South African Press.

JOURNALIST: South African Press. Now can I just continue?

It obviously affects us tremendously. Can you name the number of places throughout the country last night and this morning, yesterday and last night rather, where incidents took place; where there was rioting or confrontation with the police where there was not any member of any Foreign Press present?

MELLET: No, I cannot. That is a difficult question.

JOURNALIST: Well, were there any foreign Press in Bloemfontein?

JOURNALIST: There weren't. You can take it from me, there weren't.

There weren't any foreign Press in areas of Cape Town. You see the point that I am getting at. Although there may have been incidents yesterday in Soweto where there were foreign Press present and I won't argue whether we were responsible for incitement or not, but there were far more, far more areas nationwide where there was conflict and rioting where there were no members of the foreign Press or anyone from the South African Press as far as I know.

You can't point the finger at us now and say we are responsible for the rioting that is taking place nationwide.

MELLET: No. Can I just also stress that I have just spoken to the Commissioner of Police and he has also placed a total ban at this stage on all Pressmen in the area.

As long as this situation remains quiet because it is very obvious that the poeple behind this situation are seeking the publicity. And at the moment all Press have been barred from these areas.

We will allow people in as we have done, to see for themselves what is taking place and the Commissioner just stressed that that is the situation as it stands at the moment and that is the situation.

JOURNALIST: The point is that you are taking people into these areas where nothing is taking place.

As this morning you took people in when you know the township is quiet. We are not interested in a quiet township, we are only interested . . .

MELLET: We are also not interested in a situation where the moment the Press appears on the scene that it becomes a riotous situation.

We cannot allow that to happen. The newspapers' duty is to give the news not to create news and that is the situation that we are in at the moment.

JOURNALIST: Well, most of the members of the Press here at the moment, television and myself, were at Regina Mundi at about 8 o'clock yesterday morning and most of us were there on and off throughout the day.

Now the incident that was shown on the screen last night didn't take place until much later in the afternoon, around four o'clock.

Now we were there for most of the day and nothing happened. Now why suddenly at four o'clock is it a problem. Because you know we had been there for at least eight hours.

MELLET: Well some of these incidents that we have already got on film took place on Sunday already.

JOURNALIST: But Colonel, can I get clear on this.

Are you actually saying — or is anybody else saying — that without the presence of the Press there would be no trouble in South Africa?

Are we to blame for all of it?

MELLET: No, not at all. The Press is . . . we cannot say the Press is to blame but what is happening and I think if you can just understand the situation.

What is happening at the moment — there is a riotous situation or a troubled situation within the country and at the moment the people behind this are seeking the publicity that they can get out of the situation and the moment there is a ban on the Press, the publicity, the whole thing has just petered out and it's quiet.

It may not be the case but at the moment that is the case.

JOURNALIST: But we weren't in Soweto last night with our cameras and how many people were shot?

How much trouble was there?

You gave us a breakdown earlier. There was a considerable amount.

Yet we weren't there.

MELLET: Yes, but by then the trouble had already been the agitators, the people had already been agitated to such an extent . . . So at the moment this is the situation.

I can only assure you I am only standing here on behalf of the Commissioner of the Police.

This is the situation as it stands at the moment.

JOURNALIST: There is an awful suspicion that you are using these isolated incidents to prevent reporting of a conflict situation in South Africa.

MELLET: Now, we are not. And I want to stress this. We are not trying to put a blanket ban on news coverage. Not at all.

No but that is the impression that that might be created.

JOURNALIST: Not an impression. With respect, it is a fact.

MELLET: As far as certain people are concerned, it may be so but there are still the South African Press Association who are represented.

There are all the local papers who are represented here and they will still provide you people with the necessary . . .

JOURNALIST: Sapa don't carry TV cameras.

MELLET: Well at the moment I can tell you. If you lift a TV camera at some of these places within a minute you will have a riot.

And that you can take as a fact.

JOURNALIST: Well I repeat what I said a few minutes ago. We were there for eight hours on Monday morning, on and off, touring the area and no riot took place until after we left.

And we had to rely on somebody else's film — SABC's film — to transmit that to Europe last night because we had left the scene before that particular incident of rioting took place.

MELLET: Well, SABC has also been banned from the area.

JOURNALIST: So there is in fact a total blanket ban.

MELLET: I can tell you now, if you take a camera and show it now. Come with me. And you point that camera where I can take you within a minute you will have the film that you want.

JOURNALIST: With respect, again, you are teaching grandmothers to suck eggs.

We have been reporting riots throughout the world for the last 15 or 16 years.

MELLET: Well there are people here who will tell you that is taking place.

JOURNALIST: Of course, but these people are using us to some extent to push their message and their protest throughout the world.

What you are now doing is to stop them from doing it.

MELLET: What we are doing is trying to stop the situation of bloodshed.

JOURNALIST: Excuse me, can you tell us which areas in Soweto are operational areas?

Is it the whole of Soweto or what?

MELLET: I don't know where the words operational area came from, there is no such . . .

JOURNALIST: One of your men used it days ago.

JOURNALIST: Yeah, they used it on Sunday afternoon. (He said) "Well sir this is an operational area. You must leave it within five minutes, one mile from this spot."

MELLET: That is operational when the police is in fact in an operation but somebody announced or claimed this morning that the whole of Soweto is operational area.

I don't think that is correct.

JOURNALIST: Only where the police are acting?

JOURNALIST: If we saw this film I am sure could identify the cameraman and his camera which you might not be able to do.

MELLET: Well, you see if you dispute it or think that I am not telling the truth . . .

JOURNALIST: No, we are anxious to help you. We really want to clear our name.

MELLET: I can see if I can arrange that for a certain select group of the foreign Press but I don't want to promise.

JOURNALIST: Well, it shouldn't be difficult, Colonel. With all respect . . .

We would like to outlaw this fellow because he brought this ban on us. I mean you see it is evidence of something we are being charged with.

MELLET: I will see if I can arrange that.

JOURNALIST: Do you have any other evidence to substantiate what is really a blanket accusation?

MELLET: Not photographic evidence as such.

JOURNALIST: But evidence of an eye witness?

MELLET: The evidence is of an eye witness of the police side.

JOURNALIST: Is it not South African journalists as you have made . . .?

MELLET: No. No, there are South African journalists as well.

JOURNALIST: Who are they?

MELLET: I am not prepared to identify them.

JOURNALIST: I am Bill Nicholson, chairman of the Foreign Correspondents Association.

How is it that we can be banned on the premise that somehow foreign correspondents are guilty of inciting people, without giving us names.

Without showing us photographs?

Without allowing us to see this video tape?

MELLET: I have said I will see if I can arrange for you to see it.

JOURNALIST: Well it it is a bit like telling us or asking us will you stop beating your wife, without . . .

MELLET: Well, I have said I will try and arrange it.

JOURNALIST: Why don't you charge somebody with an offence.

MELLET: Well, I'm only here on behalf of the Commissioner and he said, and they made this point which was widely published last night and this morning and I can only repeat what he said.

That it has come to the notice of South African Police that certain Pressmen and including foreign Pressmen, he did not say it was only the foreign Pressmen.

JOURNALIST: That is what was reported.

MELLET: Well, that is not so. Well, then it is bad reporting.

He said that the statement was written out and typed out and it said that certain Pressmen, including the foreign Press and certain television news networks

JOURNALIST: That what was . . .

MELLET: Well that has nothing to do with us.

JOURNALIST: Yes, but could you answer that question. Why have you not charged anybody with incitement to riot?

MELLET: I am not able to answer that question.

I am only here to give what the Commissioner has asked me to.

JOURNALIST: Can you tell which network it is?

MELLET: I don't know.

JOURNALIST: Now that you have fixed this ban on us going into riot areas, one would assume that only information we will have about the riot incidents is the police version.

MELLET: No, Not at all. N-O. That is very wrong. It is not so.

If there is a situation we will not ban the Press from being there but we do not want the Press to start a situation.

And I want to make this quite very clear. We do not want the Press to start a situation which we saw an hour ago, what could very well happen.

The moment you lift those cameras those people will start throwing stones.

And there are representatives here from Post newspaper who not more than half an hour ago went through one of these areas which were very quiet until they arrived and their car was rocked and they had to hurriedly get out of the situation.

And the people then knew that they were present. And I think that those Post people are here now at this moment. Some of them.

JOURNALIST: No, we don't know of such things.

MELLET: Okay, there were four members of Post here now.

Who told us that story outside here early not more than ten minutes ago. And I think this gentleman was standing next to us when this happened.

So it is very, very clear that the people here at the moment, at this moment are seeking publicity.

JOURNALIST: Colonel Mellet, do you mean that a journalist may not go to Soweto in another capacity — to visit a friend?

MELLET: I don't know. I think you people don't understand the situation. Let me try and define it in this way. If you go to visit a friend and you go out and they don't know you are a journalist that is something completely different.

JOURNALIST: That is all right?

MELLET: But where you go into a situation where the Press, as a group for instance, like we have just witnessed, a riotous situation, and the people are just waiting for the Press to start an incident, we cannot allow that.

JOURNALIST: Sir, that is very different from accusing us last night of incitement.

That is very different, what you have just said is very different from the statement.

MELLET: No, but there has been defined cases of deliberate incitement and I have said now that we have got evidence for that.

JOURNALIST: Who? Who? What evidence.

MELLET: We've got it on a video.

I said I would try to arrange for it to be shown to certain members of the foreign Press.

JOURNALIST: Our permits are still valid in Soweto to go and visit friends and talk to people, visit orphanages.

MELLET: That I don't know. I have nothing to do with the permit system. That is a different department.

JOURNALIST: Can you explain to us then what the Press, the future Press is going to do.

You said selected Press would be allowed into these areas accompanied by the police.

Now how will you select these Press? What will be our credentials or lack of?

MELLET: Well, we know most of the Pressmen in this country. We know who they are and it is the individual Commissioner, his right to decide who we are going to allow in.

JOURNALIST: Can we have the names of the people who are not allowed, or are we allowed.

If something happens in Soweto and we want to come here, I mean how long is it going to take us to find out whether we can go, whether we are selected?

MELLET: Well, as I said at the moment there is a total ban on foreign newsmen.

JOURNALIST: I am asking about the future. What is your plan?

MELLET: I don't know about the future. We are talking about the present situation.

JOURNALIST: Your total ban means that permit I have which says I can come into Soweto . . .

MELLET: That permit has got nothing to do with the South African Police.

JOURNALIST: Surely it must do because . . .

MELLET: No. That . . .

JOURNALIST: You are invalidating my permit to come and cover news here?

MELLET: We did not invalidate that. That is issued by another Department.

JOURNALIST: In other words my permit is still valid. I can come in and report news.

MELLET: Let me answer your question. That permit has not been issued by the South African Police.

Whoever issued that permit, you must take the matter up with the people who issued that permit.

JOURNALIST: Yes, but you are saying that you might stop me despite the fact that I have this permit? So you can't ignore it.

MELLET: In what way?

JOURNALIST: You just said there is a total ban on foreign news coverage.

MELLET: That's right.

JOURNALIST: In other words it invalidates. Listen. Can any foreign newsman holding such a permit come into Soweto this afternoon or tomorrow morning or the next day?

MELLET: As far as my knowledge goes that permit has been withdrawn.

JOURNALIST: By whom?

MELLET: Not by the police, you had better take that up by the other Department, I don't know which department issued that permit.

JOURNALIST: But you said it was the Commissioner of Police that said that.

MELLET: I am talking about the permit. I don't know. I believe Minister Koornhof withdrew that permit.

JOURNALIST: But Colonel, your men arrested us if we didn't have the permit so you can't really disallow the . . .

MELLET: At the moment if somebody goes into this area without the police permission he will be arrested.

JOURNALIST: What do you mean by this area?

MELLET: The Soweto area. Well for all troubled areas for that matter. But we are now in Soweto and talking about Soweto.

JOURNALIST: Colonel, you have laws prohibiting incitement to riot, do you propose to arrest and charge the people you say did that?

MELLET: I am not here on a legal point. But I can tell you that if anybody deliberatly incites a riot situation then that person is liable to be arrested. No matter who he is.

JOURNALIST: Colonel, does it mean that reporters who are not here, say reporters from Post, who can go to an area where there has been an incident. What will happen to him? Are the police going to arrest him?

MELLET: If there is an area under Police control, under the Police Press Agreement, there is an agreement that if police will then take control of the situation and then the police will decide if the Press, whether the Press will be allowed or not.

JOURNALIST: So the whole of Soweto is now covered by that, is it?

JOURNALIST: Excuse me, Colonel, does this affect even people who live in that area? Let us say I live next to . . .?

MELLET: Well . . .

JOURNALIST: If I go home and I am a Pressman I could be arrested right there.

MELLET: No this is the same matter as for what happened at Silverton when it was under police control.

People who live in the area when it happened to be in control of police were not arrested. That is ridiculous.

JOURNALIST: If I am invited to dinner in Soweto, can I go?

MELLET: If you haven't got a permit you cannot go.

JOURNALIST: But this permit, you are rescinding it.

MELLET: I don't want to talk about laws.

I am explaining to you what is happening at this moment.

JOURNALIST: Colonel, the law to incite, or against inciting merely by our presence, even if we never raise our hand in a black power salute, even if we just stand there, our presence in an affected area in Soweto is enough in your eyes to incite. Whatever we do.

To stand, sit, not nothing except to be there that presence is enough in your eyes to incite?

Is that correct.

MELLET: Well, I think it is quite correct to say, sir, that the presence of the Press at the moment where the situation is very troublesome, then if you want to define as such that the Press are inciting by their presence then that is the case.

The police are forced to move in to restore order.

And in the midst of restoring order, it happens, as it happened last night — I don't say the Press started on that last night — but it could very well . . .

JOURNALIST: But the General said exactly that.

MELLET: But if the situation starts and the police are in the position where they have to restore order, and they even have to fire with birdshot and the people are injured, is that the situation, is that the situation you are asking?

Is that now newsworthy or is that creating a situation where you people . . .

JOURNALIST: Let me just repeat, yesterday, for instance the Press were in Soweto for eight hours and nothing happened.

JOURNALIST: And there were no Press in Bloemfontein yet it started as well.

JOURNALIST: It was the presence of the Police in Soweto . . .

JOURNALIST: Okay, so take last year. The commemoration ceremonies in Soweto, in South Africa, there were not confrontations, no riots not stoning nothing. But immediately this time police came in there was of course stoning. Don't you think it is perhaps the presence of the police.

MELLET: I just answered the questions. I said we, the police, we, police are not present at the situation in there, were are not also starting a situation.

JOURNALIST: You were there all day ouside Regina Mundi.

MELLET: When?

JOURNALIST: Yesterday.

MELLET: Yes, but I wasn't there.

JOURNALIST: On a point of clarification, Colonel, the statement said not only was this open incitement happening in Soweto, but in other areas of the country.

Could you identify which other areas there were foreign Press in?

JOURNALIST: With respect Colonel, there is a very large difference between what you are saying now and passive role of the police by encouraging or inciting riots by their presence and the heavy implication by the Commissioner of Police last night where he talked of the rioting which generally follows the presence of the foreign Press.

If you can clarify that now I think it would be a help to all of us.

MELLET: No, I will stick to what the Commissioner said. That was a statement made yesterday.

JOURNALIST: Colonel, considering the gravity of this plan and how widely it is going to be reported worldwide, why is it that you are in the hot seat, why isn't the Commissioner here?

MELLET: He is busy in his office with a riotous situation throughout the country.

JOURNALIST: There is a riotous situation in this office.

JOURNALIST: He should be here.

JOURNALIST: Colonel, I still don't understand the distinctions you draw on this ban.

At one stage you said there is a total ban on the presence of foreign journalists in the townships, but I also heard you say it was perfectly okay to go for dinners and private visits.

Then I subsequently heard you say, I thought, that all permits have been withdrawn and if you didn't have a permit you were subject to risk.

Could you just please take it step by step and tell us where we will be legal, where we won't be legal and what the circumstances will be.

MELLET: Well in the townships at the moment if you haven't got a permit then you are not allowed in. Is that quite clear?

I believe and you will have to clear it by whatever department is concerned that all those permits have been withdrawn.

That is what I believe. It is not a police decision. It is not a police permit.

JOURNALIST: So in other words if we explained this to the Administration Board they would be able to tell us whether they have in fact withdrawn them. But you have just said Minister Koornhof . . .

MELLET: I believe so. I don't know exactly who, but I believe so.

JOURNALIST: But I mean your men must have orders presumably. I mean if we are stopped and if we produce the bit of paper we now have, the permit, what are your orders to your men? Are we then arrested or what? We are being given no guidance.

MELLET: As I say I am not involved with the legal aspects of that and I am not involved with what orders are being given out. I am here merely as a PRO for the police.

JOURNALIST: Yes, but Colonel do you mean to say you don't know what is happening among them men of you command here in Soweto?

MELLET: It is quite possible that those orders have gone out.

JOURNALIST: Well, shouldn't we know?

MELLET: I can find out whether those orders have been given.

JOURNALIST: Coming to local unrest, who is going to be allowed into operational areas and what exactly is the criteria restricting them?

MELLET: As I said earlier at the moment nobody is allowed in. Unless they are under police escort which we will decide.

JOURNALIST: But how are we going to decide. These are the people we get all our news from in there.

MELLET: I just want to say this is not a permanent thing. It is a temporary thing. It is a temporary measure. It is not a permanant thing at this stage at all.

JOURNALIST: But this could stay for five years, 10 years, 20 years?

MELLET: Listen at the moment we are with the position that there is all peace and quiet in the country and we are quite satisfied that we are going to try and maintain that peace.

And we are not going to let anybody, not a Pressman, not a policeman, not a minister, is going to spark off a situation wqhere this is going to start all over again. And that is the situation we are at the present moment.