

Yusuf Abramjee's column in the Pretoria News on 10 November 2009.

Let's deal with the real issue at hand

A "turf-war" is apparently raging between Police Minister, Nathi Mthethwa and his deputy, Fikile Mbalula. Weekend media reports suggested that the bad blood between the two high-ranking ANC politicians could soon end-up with a "punch-up".

The latest in a series of reported tensions between Mthethwa and Mbalula comes after Mbalula cancelled a planned media briefing with the National Press Club in Pretoria, which I chair. It was scheduled for last Wednesday.

Reports said that Mthethwa and Police Commissioner, Bheki Cele, pressured Mbalula in cancelling the media briefing. It is also alleged that Mthethwa is trying to keep his deputy away from the limelight.

In a joint statement, the trio said the briefing to the Press Club "has not been cancelled, but postponed. Both the Minister and his deputy enjoy a healthy, professional working relationship with clear areas of responsibilities. The police leadership will not be affected by such gossip and remains focused at channeling their energies towards fighting crime. We condemn such allegations with the contempt they deserve."

It is important that the facts surrounding the briefing with Mbalula be placed in perspective.

The Press Club received a request from the office of Mbalula in October to host a briefing. Items on the agenda were provided by the office of the Deputy Minister: "2010 security preparations, visible policing, administration and the ANC pre-and-post Polokwane political realignment and the future."

The original briefing was scheduled for last Monday 26 October but was postponed at his request because according to Mbalula's office he had another engagement. It was later re-scheduled for Wednesday, 4 November, and invitations were circulated to members and the general media on Monday. By Tuesday afternoon, prior to the briefing, we received scores of RSVP's.

The briefing was cancelled late on Tuesday afternoon at the request of Mbalula. In a circular to the media, the Press Club said: "*The National Press Club regrets to announce that the media briefing with Fikile Mbalula, the Deputy Minister of Police, that was scheduled to take place tomorrow morning, 4 November 2009, has been cancelled on his request.*"

Mbalula did indicate that he still wants to address the National Press Club and that a "new date" will be provided.

The Press Club hosts media briefings regularly with newsmakers. Suggestions that there was political pressure on us to cancel the briefing are completely untrue. As a Press Club guest, the final decision lay with Mbalula himself who requested we cancel and re-schedule.

The National Press club remains committed to providing a platform to all people whom we deem are newsworthy.

It was also reported that I received calls from Mthethwa and Cele requesting that I do not give Mbalula a platform. This is not entirely correct. It was a general discussion about the briefing and items on the agenda. However, the Minister did later suggest that we consider hosting a joint briefing with all three of them at some stage.

The decision to cancel was entirely that of Mbalula. He did not give reasons why he wanted it postponed and I can only suspect that he took the decision after speaking to his boss and to Cele. If anyone has to explain, it's Mbalula.

More importantly, the time has come for both these politicians to speak-up and resolve their differences, if any. There are just too many claims and incidents being cited of tensions and differences. Senior police officials and Ministry officials who are being quoted are being called "faceless sources." This may be true but where there's smoke, there is fire.

We need a united fight against crime. There is no time to be sidetracked by petty politics or bickering. The on-going reports about tensions between Mthethwa and Mbalula is taking away the focus from the real issue – policing and fighting crime.

It's quite clear that there are tensions within the ministry. It's now time to sort it out once and for all. President Jacob Zuma should mediate. Mthethwa and Mbalula need to focus on their jobs, and not on in-fighting.

**Yusuf Abramjee is Head of News and Current Affairs at Primedia Broadcasting and he writes this column in his personal capacity*

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