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Mbalula needs a cool head

Newly appointed Police Minister Fikile Mbalula has never been shy about shooting his mouth off concerning his various portfolios in government. No doubt some die-hard rugby fans were offended when Mbalula, while serving as sport minister, described the Springboks as a "bunch of losers", although this was quite true at the time.

They would probably have agreed, though, when he urged the Springboks to "moer" the opposition on the eve of their departure for the 2015 World Cup.

But these comments were not about life and death. Rash comments in the law and order environment are far more dangerous. When appointed deputy police minister in 2009, Mbalula enthusiastically followed in the footsteps of his predecessor, Susan Shabangu, in urging police officers to use maximum force in dealing with criminals or suspected criminals. Shabangu most famously told police to "kill the bastards" and not to worry about regulations pertaining to the use of firearms. Mbalula described the fight against crime as a war. He said it was "unavoidable" that innocent civilians would be killed in the crossfire.

While there is no sure way of proving a connection, it is notable that from 2009 to 2012, there was a substantial spike in the number of people killed by police or dying as a result of police action. For example, Mozambican taxi driver Mido Macia was dragged behind a police van and then left to die in police cells. His alleged crime was blocking a road with his vehicle. Andries Tatane was killed by heavily armed police in 2011 during a service delivery protest in Ficksburg.

An innocent young woman was also killed when police fired indiscriminately at a car they thought had been hijacked.

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The pinnacle of this madness was, of course, the Marikana massacre, in which 34 mine workers were shot and killed and many others were wounded.

Now Mbalula has returned to the police ministry and has immediately reverted to imprudent language on how police use their firearms.

"We are not going to be soft on criminals. Police officers must fight fire with fire," he said at a parade to mark his official welcome to the police ministry.

"No police officer will die in vain; anyone who kills a police officer will be met with fire. I am not saying shoot to kill, but shoot back. You have guns; use them to protect yourselves and communities."

The real problem in the police is training, particularly in the area of public order. This was recognised by Judge Ian Farlam at the Marikana commission.

Mbalula will need to concentrate on improving the training of public order police, station-based police officers and detectives if he wants to see better results in fighting crime. Police, for example, need to be trained in how to identify criminals before they are urged to "shoot the bastards".

The second large problem is that since 2009, President Jacob Zuma's appointments of police ministers have been a disaster.

Nathi Mthethwa wanted the Criminal Procedure Act changed so that police could more easily kill criminals. He was apparently ignorant of the fact that section 49 of the act already allows police to shoot in self-defence or in defence of the lives of others.

Nathi Nhleko, during his term in the ministry, was more interested in proving that in Nkandla, swimming pools were really fire pools.

Mbalula has the energy of both of them put together and could perhaps get things done.

But let us hope that this return to intemperate language in the police ministry does not herald another spike in the number of deaths at the hands of police.