

Daily dice with death

MOLOTO ROAD: ‘YOU GET ON THE BUS KNOWING YOU MAY NOT GET OFF ALIVE’

» **‘I can still smell the burning flesh and hear the screams.’**

Sipho Mabena

For domestic worker Maria Mahlangu and thousands others like her, every day starts and ends with a terrifying daily game of Russian roulette on the Road of Death.

This is because to get to work or school in Gauteng, they have to travel on the infamous Moloto Road in the early hours from Mpumalanga.

“You get on the bus knowing that you might not get off alive,” Mahlangu said.

“Every day, you are constantly nervous because of the real possibility of never getting off the bus alive. You leave home knowing very well you might not make it to work, or never make it back home alive,” she said.

The mother of two was among 57 passengers who narrowly escaped death last Friday when a bus they were travelling on from Pretoria burst into flames, killing six people and leaving at least 14 injured.

She is lucky to be alive – and this is only because she was seated on the third seat from the door and was able to get out of the bus quickly when people started screaming “fire” from the back.

Mahlangu, 56, from Tweefontein village, said that on that fateful afternoon, she was looking forward to arriving home early – but little did she know the horror that awaited them on the notorious R573 Moloto Road.

All was well when the bus department from Marabastad station in Pretoria just after 1pm, making its way out of the city centre and then onto Moloto Road.

Just after passing Roodeplaats Dam, smoke started bellowing out from the back of the bus – and then there was pandemonium.

Being tired, Mahlangu was nodding off when people started screaming.

People were running to the front in a stampede and some jumped through windows as the driver stopped the bus.

“It was only by the grace of the Lord that I took a seat next to the door. Most of the time I am at the back chatting to my friend, one of the passengers who burnt to death.

“I can still smell the burning flesh and hear the screams of those dying people,” Mahlangu recalled.

She has travelled the perilous road for more than two decades, saying a little prayer of mercy before getting on the bus and a thankful prayer when she gets off.



DEATH TRIP? Passengers aboard the 4.45pm bus from Tweefontein to Marabastad in the dark on Moloto Road, known for being one of South Africa’s most dangerous roads. Pictures: Jacques Nelles



IN THE FRAY. Maria Mahlangu who survived a recent bus accident along Moloto Road in which six passengers burnt to death.

Her typical day starts at 2am, when she starts preparing to be at her stop by 2.45am to catch the first bus for the about 150km ride to Belle Ombre station, where she would catch a connecting bus to the Pretoria East suburbs.

Mahlangu only gets to her workplace at 7am and knocks off at 5pm. Then she takes a bus back to Belle Ombre to catch the return bus home the former KwaNdebele homeland and gets home at about 8pm. “I spend about four hours on the road to get to work and then another four to get home. So, for eight hours, each weekday, I am on the road,” she said.

Domestic workers earn as little as R3 000 a month and about a R1 000 of that goes to transport but, Mahlangu said, as the breadwinner of her family of four, she needs the money and has to

gamble with her life. Since the late ’70s, Moloto Road has seen some of horrific road accidents, claiming thousands of lives as government’s repeated promises to upgrade the road have come to naught. The commuters were hopeful that their pleas for intervention were finally heard when, in 2017, then president Jacob Zuma announced the SA National Roads Agency (Sanral) has started the planning phase of a R4.5 billion upgrade of the road. But Tweefontein community leader James Skosana said all Sanral has since done was constructing roundabouts and putting ground reflectors on the barrier line. “We are still asking ourselves how come R4 billion only covered the roundabouts? The road is a single lane and carries the same amount of traffic as the N1. How many more people must die until something is done?” In 2016, Zuma said govern-

ment had signed an cooperation agreement with China to build the Moloto Rail Development Corridor. But nothing has ever been said about the corridor since, with residents, organised by the Moloto Rail Corridor Concerned Residents, camping at the Union Buildings in Pretoria last September, demanding answers.

When their pleas fell on deaf ears, the group approached Public Protector Busisiwe Mkhwebane to probe the delay.

Mpumalanga MEC for community safety, security and liaison Vusi Shongwe, public works, roads and transport MEC Mohita Latchminarain, as well as Gauteng MEC for public transport and roads infrastructure Jacob Mamabolo, visited the bereaved families of the latest crash victims yesterday.

But Skosana said that was cold comfort for commuters who continue to be sitting ducks for the Road of Death, without an alternative route to get to Pretoria.

About 500 people use buses each day to commute between Pretoria and the area.

Some of the horrific bus accidents on the Road of Death:

► **April 2006:** Six people are critically injured and 80 slightly hurt when three buses collided at the Pienaar’s River off-ramp.

► **March 2006:** 13 people are killed and 71 seriously injured when a bus collided with two cars.

► **November 2013:** 29 people are killed when a bus collided with stationery bus near Kwaggafontein in Mpumalanga.

► **November 2019:** Six people are killed when a bus collided with a cash-in-transit truck.

► **December 2019:** Three people are killed when a truck allegedly swerved into the oncoming traffic lane and collided with a bus in Moloto village.

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She says a little prayer before getting on

Don’t miss our picture spread on Moloto Road tomorrow