



CITY OF JOHANNESBURG

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City of Johannesburg Speech by
Executive Mayor, Cllr Herman Mashaba

Final salute to 3 of Joburg's Brave Firefighters

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Note to editors: *Please see the speech extract from Mayor Herman's remarks at today's memorial service for three firefighters who lost their lives during last week's fire in the inner city of Johannesburg.*

The Moropane, Muedi and Ndlovu families,

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Let me begin by extending my deepest sympathy.

I can't imagine the pain and the grief that is in your hearts.

But during this time of great sorrow, I hope you can find comfort in the profound gratitude of the people of Johannesburg.

Secondly, allow me to extended my greetings to the Acting Chief of the Johannesburg Emergency Management Services, Mr Arthur Mqwa,

Our EMS Fire Fighters and Senior Management,

The Acting Premier of Gauteng, Hon. Uhuru Moilola,

Speaker of Council, Cllr Vasco da Gama,

MMC for Public Safety, Cllr Michael Sun,

Members of the Mayoral Committee,

Councillors and Officials of the City of Johannesburg,

Distinguished guests,

Members of the media,

Fellow residents,

I truly believe that every resident of this City is with you today, as they have been since the tragedy of last week.

None of us will ever forget what happened last Wednesday, the day when September 5, 2018 - our worst collective nightmare - leapt from the shadows and cruelly claimed three valued members of the City of Johannesburg family.

On that day - exactly a week to the day - black smoke poured from the Bank of Lisbon building in the CBD, and firefighters rushed to the scene, fighting bravely despite incredibly difficult conditions.

Once again, neighbours, friends, family members and heroes have been taken from us.

At this moment, the sorrow and anger we feel is more than we can bear. No words can do justice to the sacrifice that has been made or to the sadness that we feel.

Yet, even in the depths of our grief, we know there is more than sorrow here: there is valor, there is virtue and there is honor.

So today, we pause to celebrate the lives of three of our finest servicemen.

While I never had the honor of meeting Fire Fighters Moropane, Muedi and Ndlovu, I have been amazed at the many remarks which have been made about these three heroes.

It is evident that they touched the lives of many in a positive way.

How many of us, gathered here today, can say that they have been part of the bedrock of their community or have been considered part of the fabric of society?

No one here will ever forget how Simphiwe, Khathutsheli and Mduduzi's daily acts of kindness and generosity helped make the broader community of Johannesburg such a special place.

Their legacy will surely live on in every home, on every sidewalk, in every yard, and on every corner of this incredible City we all call home.

Most of all, our three heroes will be remembered as family men.

Indeed, they loved and treasured their families in a special way.

How else can explain their decision to risk life and limb to save others?

Only a deep and profound love for family and for mankind could have driven our colleagues to make the professional choices they made.

Be as it may, we must not accept the explanation that their chosen careers were inherently dangerous and therefore, their tragic deaths were not wholly unexpected.

I do not accept this explanation.

Not under the circumstances that our brothers lost their lives.

It was heartbreaking to have to read a short but powerful tribute, on social media, by the wife of Fire Fighter Moropane to her husband.

Watching the photos of Simphiwe with his young children, I wondered to myself: Who would carry them now?

Every Johannesburg resident, and the broader City of Johannesburg family, should take over from Fire Fighters Moropane, Muedi and Ndlovu left off.

At difficult moments like these, the bereaved often find comfort in the presence of colleagues, family, neighbours and friends but it is when we have all left that the reality of a loved one lost dawns.

As people who have lived through the death of a loved one, we all know what a lonely experience it can be to wake up in the days following the funeral of a person who was ever-present in our daily lives.

While everyone simply moves on, it is us who are left to pick up the pieces.

In this instance, I cannot begin to imagine how the widows of our three heroes will explain to their small children why their fathers are no longer present.

This is where family comes in.

To the Moropane, Muedi and Ndlovu families, surround these young wives and mothers.

Envelope them with love and warmth and, while they will feel occasional moments of sadness and loneliness, let that not be as a result of your actions.

Please, be the perfect embodiment of the love of God.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Firefighters are a special brotherhood, the bonds of which are formed by the omnipresence of danger - and Simphiwe, Khathutsheli and Mduduzi were beloved members of that brotherhood.

But nothing exemplifies their greatness as citizens more than their ultimate sacrifice. The tragic events of last week should remind us of the incredible bravery of firefighters everywhere.

When there's a fire anywhere in this City, our firefighters reply: "Send me."

When the call came that the Bank of Lisbon building had caught fire and that the innocent lives of employees of various provincial government departments were at risk, the men and women of the EMS did not hesitate.

And on September 5, when the call came again, Firefighters Moropane, Muedi and Ndlovu did not waver.

They answered the call of duty, no doubt with the lives of others top of mind.

Perhaps they were concerned for their own too.

As they sped from their station to the Johannesburg CBD, they followed the same treacherous trail that countless others had followed in the years before.

As they finally arrived on the scene of the fire and caught a glimpse of the deadly blaze, they must have realised that there was no turning back.

They jumped in, as they had rehearsed many times, and began the task of engaging with the worst horror any fire fighter could imagine.

Tragically, circumstances, some of which they simply should not have had to deal with, conspired to make their rescue efforts hell.

They lost their lives unnecessarily.

Today, as we mourn our brave heroes as well as to console their loving families and to celebrate their memory, let us also make a resolution, a commitment to ourselves and to one another: Let us commit to being worthy of the courage and bravery that they showed.

Let us begin by uncovering the truth about what happened, demanding answers to the unanswered questions, and then doing whatever is necessary to make sure a tragedy like this one never happens again.

Let us look closely at that building and decide whether it can be salvaged and repaired or whether it should be taken down.

Let's also spread the net out wide and look at other buildings - both private and government owned - in Gauteng and the rest of the country.

I can't imagine that it will be an inconvenience for us to show that we care about the wellbeing and safety of our countrymen and women?

Surely not.

Elected officials and public representatives such as myself are fast gaining a reputation for not caring about the lives of ordinary South Africans.

We are no longer seen as servants of the people.

And how can we argue otherwise, when the deaths of our fire fighters could have been avoided had appropriate action been taken?

I ask this question because information at our disposal indicates that complaints had been raised about the Bank of Lisbon building since 2014.

In addition, there appears to be a report which reveals that this building is only 21% compliant with occupational health and safety standards, against the norm of 85%, and that this information was known by authorities since August 27 this year.

I am on record as having questioned the safety of most of buildings in the inner city.

On the 1st December 2016, I raised sharply the issue of derelict buildings, their safety and how they contributed to the scourge of crime and general lawlessness in the Inner City.

While I was expecting a positive response, I was instead met with ridicule and name-calling.

This reaction had me questioning whether the City of Johannesburg had actually ever had a government.

A government, by simply definition, is a mechanism through which organisational policies are enforced.

With so many lives at risk, one has to ask: what exactly were those who came before us governing and what policies were they enforcing all along?

Well, we have decided to take tough action.

I would like to announce that the City will intensify raids of buildings that have been hijacked and every effort will be made to return them to their rightful owners.

Those that are uninhabitable will be condemned.

Another crucial element of this exercise is to take back our Inner City from criminal syndicates that are using abandoned and hijacked buildings for criminal means.

We will do this to honour our fallen heroes.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The Bank of Lisbon building tragedy is not the first.

In May 2015, Fire Fighters Michael Letsosa and Daniel Zwane lost their lives in a blaze at the Nedbank building in the CBD, on Albertina Sisulu Street.

They were trapped in the basement of the burning building.

During the deployment of the crews, the team led by the Incident Commander became fragmented, with individual members becoming disorientated and lost.

The Incident Commander managed to find his way out of the building while Fire Fighters Letsosa and Zwane unfortunately lost their lives.

A May 2016 report into the incident found that there was a failure to implement Breathing Apparatus procedures, the Positive Pressure Ventilation fan inside the building was stopped, the mechanical ventilation of the building did not activate and that live wires were exposed, among other findings.

While some recommendations were made, including that training should be provided for our fire fighters, I am not satisfied that we know what really happened in that tragedy.

Therefore, I feel compelled to reopen that investigation in order to get the full extent of the Nedbank Mall fire disaster.

Following the Bank of Lisbon tragedy, I can only imagine how low our fire fighters' morale must have sank.

But I want to assure you that we are taking every step to limit the possibility of such a disaster occurring again.

Myself and City Manager, Dr Ndivhoniswani Lukhwareni, are working around the clock to acquire 25 new fire trucks. The money has already been allocated.

This will be essential in the immediate to long-term because we currently have 15 fire engines but only a fraction are functional.

Due to many years of neglect, the EMS fire engine fleet was never adequately maintained or replaced.

The supplier whom was awarded the supply contract by the previous administration went into business rescue and was unable to deliver the fire engines as ordered.

To further worsen the situation, we discovered that contract was fraught with illegalities and allegation of corruption, the contract had to be cancelled.

However, we were able to salvage 7 fire engines (5 new, 2 newly refurbished) fire engines from that contract.

Even under these extremely challenging situations, our EMS and firefighters continues to service the residents of Johannesburg.

Commitments have been given by the MMC for Public Safety to expedite the resolution of some of the issues faced by EMS.

An essential part of eliminating fires similar to those in the Nedbank Mall and the Bank of Lisbon buildings includes the rejuvenation of our Inner City.

Put simply and bluntly, we need to rebuild our Inner City. That way, we can be assured that our buildings are safe and liveable.

This is especially necessary because, to date, we have identified 500 buildings that have either been hijacked or abandoned and most are in a bad state.

To this end, we have established specialised units to combat the scourge of hijacked buildings and enforce compliance with building by-laws.

Fellow residents,

Let us pause and pay tribute to all of our firefighters, who have forsaken a life of material gain, safety and comfort and chosen to enter the most dangerous arena of all so we can be protected.

A special thank you also goes to Mayor Solly Msimanga and Mayor Mzwandile Masina, as well as the fire fighters from OR Tambo International Airport, for being with us during our time of need.

We will be with you in your time of need as you have been with us.

And to our fallen heroes, may you rest in peace.

I thank you.

Cllr Herman Mashaba
Executive Mayor
City of Joburg

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