

SOUTH AFRICA: Vice-chancellor faces death

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The vice-chancellor who was slated by South Africa's rulers for 'pardoning' four white students who filmed a racist video at the University of the Free State, last week reopened the issue for further discussion. Meanwhile, the official opposition laid a charge against a ruling party leader for saying the vice-chancellor should be "shot and killed because he is a racist".

Thebe Meeko, chair of the African National Congress (ANC) Youth League in Free State province, was quoted in the national daily newspaper *The Times* as threatening the (black) vice-chancellor, Professor Jonathan Jansen.

In his inaugural speech two weeks ago, Jansen made national news by saying the university would drop its complaints against four white Afrikaner students who filmed a video in which black cleaners were humiliated - including by being told to eat food apparently urinated on by the students. Criminal charges against the students for *crimen injuria* are proceeding.

Other major moves announced by Jansen to transform and promote reconciliation at the conservative university - including racial integration of student residences, banning initiation practices and alcohol at residences, and compelling white and black students to learn each other's languages - got lost in the furore.

Today the *Sunday Times*, South Africa's biggest weekly paper, reported that another racial incident had surfaced at the university. White students are alleged to have urinated and poured alcohol on a fellow student's linen after a recent rugby match.

In his speech, Meeko reportedly said that "like President Jacob Zuma when he said the police must meet fire with fire, the shoot-to-kill approach must also apply to all the racists, including Jansen - because he is a racist. He must know that we have removed more powerful people than him before. Jansen is equally a criminal like those four racists."

According to shadow minister of higher education and training Dr Wilmot James, who laid a complaint of hate speech with the Equality Court and a criminal charge of intimidation against Meeko, the youth leader also stated: "We will shoot to kill racism and those who are racist. Jansen must go."

The ANC Youth League later said Meeko was referring to racism and not Jansen. But James described the statement as "an absolute disgrace. It is embarrassing for us as a country, for the ANC and for the government".

Following the controversy over his 'pardon' and pledge to compensate the humiliated cleaners, Jansen announced that he would resume discussions with all stakeholders regarding the pardon of the so-called 'Reitz Four'.

On Wednesday Jansen met a representative of the Human Rights Commission, on behalf of the five workers. It was agreed that "further processes on the way forward" would be announced shortly. He also met with ANC Youth League national President Julius Malema for a discussion that the university said was conducted in "a spirit of mutual respect".

On Monday the Free State council said it had "unanimously expressed support" for Jansen regarding the handling of managerial issues, including the Reitz matter. "The Council supports all active attempts to encourage reconciliation and accepts Professor Jansen's integrity and bona fides with regard to the handling of this issue," it said in a statement.

The university's alumni association expressed "shock and astonishment" at the criticism of Jansen following his speech - which, it added, "was received with a standing ovation". The criticism had contributed towards "mass polarisation, distrust and suspicion" which "stands in sharp contrast to Jansen's message of reconciliation, unity and hope".

On Friday the vice-chancellors' association Higher Education South Africa, which held its quarterly meeting last week, welcomed the university's inviting of further engagement on the Reitz Four issue and stressed that "the important national issues of transformation, social justice and reconciliation should receive attention in the actions of university leaders".

Institutional autonomy, HESA added in a statement, "should be appropriately balanced with public accountability".

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