DAILY MAVERICK

DEFEND TRUTH

CHRISTMAS EVE DISASTER

Six months after Boksburg gas tanker explosion, families of 41 victims left with unanswered questions

Family of the deceased during the memorial service for the 12 healthcare heroes of the Boksburg explosion at Tambo Memorial Hospital on 10 January 2023 in Boksburg, South Africa. (Photo: Gallo Images / OJ Koloti)

By Yeshiel Panchia Follow 26 Jun 2023 6

While law enforcement and municipal bodies have promised justice, the victims and their families have had little in the way of communication or answers. And the driver of the tanker, who was traced to his home in KwaZulu-Natal, said 'I'm stressed. I'm stressed too much'.

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On Christmas Eve of last year, South Africans awoke to a tragedy unfolding. Videos of a raging fireball and images of burnt bodies were posted on social media in the aftermath of a tanker explosion in the eastern Johannesburg suburb of Boksburg.

Images of the 12 healthcare workers killed in the Boksburg tanker explosion placed in front of the stage during the service at Tambo Memorial Hospital on 10 January 2023. (Photo: Gallo Images / OJ Koloti)

Six months have passed since the incident, which left 41 people dead, dozens injured, and a nearby hospital devastated. While law enforcement and municipal bodies have promised justice, the victims and their families have had little in the way of communication or answers.

"She phoned and said 'I'm burned'," says Samuel of his wife, Margaret, a nurse at Tambo Memorial Hospital. She phoned him immediately after the explosion. "Burnt from what? Just come here quickly. But when I go there, I get disaster [sic]. I just looked once and I run away."

"I was at home… and I heard a very big bang sound. I didn't know what was going on… and then seeing a truck is stuck under the bridge, how? When I took the video, the moment I heard the sound, the gas, I told the guys, 'Let's run. This thing is going to explode,' " said one witness, who asked not to be named as they had lost family members in the incident.

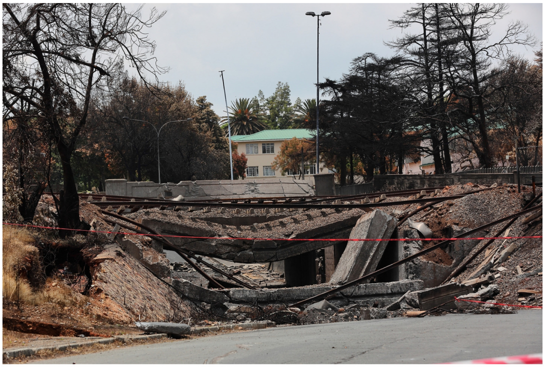
On that disastrous morning, the tanker, carrying 60,000 litres of liquefied petroleum gas (LPG) departed from its rest stop, en route to Botswana. Owned and operated by Infinite Fleet Transport, and piloted by a driver from labour broker Innovative Staffing Solutions (ISS), the tanker collided with a bridge overpass just outside Tambo Memorial Hospital.

Read more in Daily Maverick: Lives of service — these are the 12 healthcare workers who perished in the Boksburg explosion on Christmas Eve

The tanker's roof cap was scraped off in the collision, causing the invisible, highly flammable liquefied gas to leak. Bystanders arrived to view the scene, unaware of the danger the tanker posed. Shortly after the leak, the gas ignited.

Ekurhuleni Fire Department members attempted to extinguish the flames. The tanker driver, who is reported to have attempted to create a cordon with private security members on the scene, fell unconscious from gas inhalation and was taken to hospital.

An hour after the initial accident, with fire department officials and bystanders at the scene, the tanker exploded.



The view of the bridge where wreaths were laid along Hospital Street, Boksburg, after the tanker explosion on 26 December 2022. (Photo: Gallo Images / Fani Mahuntsi)

"I saw this massive explosion with flames coming towards me," said Pam Bjornstad, a witness who lives three streets down from where the tanker exploded. "This explosion came and it was just like heat, like really, really hot… and we just heard screaming."

"The initial explosion area, from the accounts that I've read, would have been around 1,600 square metres," said Malcolm Midgley, a retired battalion chief from Professional Fire Services and a 42-year fire service veteran and hazmat fire specialist.

"But the extent of the heat and radiated heat… A lot of people were seriously burned, grievously burnt, lost body parts and limbs… but that was from the explosion, and from the overpressure. That whole area should have been evacuated."

Samuel's wife, Margaret, was within range of the fireball. A healthcare professional in the public sector for decades, she was taken to hospital in Alberton when paramedics arrived on the scene. "The way I saw her then was so very bad… that guys for counselling, they said it's only 14% that she can live… 14% is nothing." Margaret died a few days later, leaving three children.

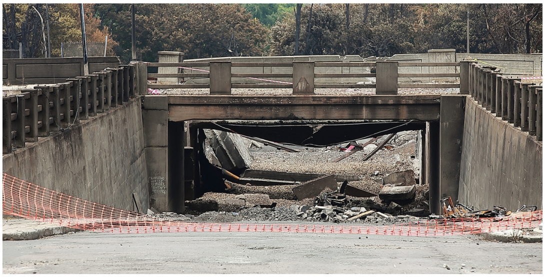
"I lost a mother. I lost a friend. I lost a buddy," said Samuel and Margaret's eldest son, who asked not to be named. The family was supposed to journey to Limpopo together on Christmas eve. Because he was running late, Margaret decided to go in to work. "I was late basically… That mistake will never be rectified."

While Midgley makes it clear that the priority response on the ground should have been to immediately evacuate the area, a multitude of factors appear to have contributed to the disaster on that fateful Christmas Eve.

A confluence of failures

The tanker, owned and operated by Infinite Fleet Transport, was transporting LPG from the Port of Richards Bay to Botswana. The driver is reported to have spent the night at a nearby truck stop, before departing early on the morning of 24 December 2022.

According to the ISS's managing director, Arnoux Maré, the driver got lost and attempted to return to his approved route. "Unfortunately, he just missed a turn-off, and what he did is he took the next turn-off to rectify his route."



The bridge along Hospital Street collapsed during the tragic Boksburg tanker explosion on 26 December 2022. (Photo: Gallo Images / Fani Mahuntsi)

Maré said that when the driver came to the bridge overpass, he conducted a visual height assessment of the bridge and thought the tanker would pass underneath. Maré claims that the slope of the road beneath the bridge led to the collision.

"He verified that the horse would be able to pass under the bridge, he verified that the trailer would be able to pass under the bridge" said Maré.

"The truck did pass under the bridge… but when he started doing the incline, obviously the height of the truck changed and that caused the valve to actually scrape on the truck and did damage and caused the leak."

The height of the tanker trailer could not be independently verified, but it is thought to have been around 4m. According to law, the maximum height of a vehicle without an abnormal permit is 4.3m, which means that any obstacle lower than that must be signposted.

There was signage on the bridge itself, according to Google Maps data, until at least November 2021, indicating a bridge height of 3.6m, but there was not any signage before the turn toward the bridge, as required by law.

"The roads authority must warn anyone if a bridge is lower than that, simply because your standard vehicle is allowed to be 4.3m high," said road traffic and transport legislation consultant Alta Swanepoel, who assisted in the construction of the Road Traffic Signs Manual as well as the drafting of dangerous goods legislation.

"As I understand it… that bridge was 3.6m [high]… so you need to have a regulatory sign before the last turn-off to show that you're not allowed to continue."

While there was no regulatory signage before the turn, the lack of signage doesn't entirely account for the driver attempting to pass under the bridge itself.

"If they run up to the bridge and they realise they cannot pass, then they would have to reverse that gas tanker from there to the first safe place where they could actually turn that vehicle around," continued Swanepoel.

Boksburg Park

Bystanders inspect the collapsed bridge on Hospital Street that collapsed in the Boksburg tanker explosion on 26 December 2022. (Photo: Gallo Images / Fani Mahuntsi)

On the approach to the bridge is a turn-off to the entrance of Boksburg Lake. The tri-axle tanker, with a length of less than 20m including the truck, might have been able to use this as a safe spot at which to turn around once confronted with the low-lying bridge.

Moreover, standard practice in the transport of hazardous materials includes performing a pre-inspection of the route, noting detours and possible hazards, all of which the driver is to be briefed on before a journey. Such an obstacle on a possible route such as the low-lying bridge might have been noted. This is called a route risk inspection (RRA).

'I'm not feeling okay about this'

We put these questions to the driver of the tanker and Innovative Staffing Solutions, asking whether the signage was visible and why the driver did not turn around, as well as requesting a copy of the RRA.

The driver of the tanker was arrested while in hospital soon after the incident, and charged with several cases of culpable homicide. He was released a few days later due to a lack of evidence.

Daily Maverick managed to trace the driver to his home town in KwaZulu-Natal.

"I'm stressed. I'm stressed too much," he said. "If I'm talking about this accident, like, I'm feeling confused. I'm not feeling okay about this."

He directed further questions to his lawyer.

Attorney William Booth, who represents both the driver and Innovative Staffing Solutions, declined to answer these questions on the basis that they are subject to ongoing investigations and possible criminal and civil litigation.

"As the matter is essentially sub judice, I do not feel it is appropriate to deal with your questions as some of them relate to very specific details which may impact on my clients should any of them be criminally charged or, for that matter, should there be an inquest."

Calls for help unanswered

Swanepoel said: "As far as the bridge is concerned, you must realise that you actually need a group of signage.

"You need a warning sign ahead of this bridge. Then you need a regulatory sign stopping people from going in that direction if the vehicle does not comply. And then another warning sign. So that would be the local authority that would be responsible for it."

That responsibility falls squarely on the City of Ekurhuleni.

The then mayor of Ekurhuleni, Tania Campbell, claimed in an interview in January that while investigations were still ongoing, "The current reports are indicating that Ekurhuleni signage is in place."

However, the lack of adequate signage is not the only error that critics highlight in the City of Ekurhuleni that led to the disaster.

Witnesses interviewed by *Daily Maverick,* as well as the official log of events from ISS, indicated that multiple calls to Ekurhuleni emergency numbers to report the accident went entirely unanswered.

"I have requested copies of those logs," said Campbell.

"The report tabled to me has indicated the SAPS 10111 number was not answered; however, the Ekurhuleni number was answered."

The ISS logs contradict Campbell's account, indicating that it took the driver and ISS controller no less than nine phone calls and 15 minutes before any emergency number was reachable — the first being the SAPS 10111 line.

This reporter filed Promotion of Access to Information Act (PAIA) requests earlier this year to the City of Ekurhuleni requesting these logs. The requests were denied, citing an ongoing criminal investigation.

Mayor Campbell was ousted in a vote of no confidence on 30 March 2023.

First responders

Eyewitness reports indicate that the first to arrive on the accident scene were private security personnel, who assisted the tanker driver in attempting to clear the area and create a cordon because of the risk of an explosion.

Thirty minutes after the driver notified the ISS controller of the accident and gas leak, the Ekurhuleni Fire Department arrived on the scene. By then the gas leaking from the tanker had begun to burn.

In video footage posted on social media of that day, two Ekurhuleni fire-fighting vehicles can be seen, with firefighters attempting to extinguish the now burning tanker. Bystanders are near the firefighting vehicles, with a cordon established less than 150m from the tanker at the northern and southern ends of the bridge.

"Your initial response teams should evacuate the area regardless of whether there was a fire or not," said Midgley.

"Your hot zone for a gas incident should be at least 800 metres," he continued. "It increases to the recommended, which is about 1,600-odd metres, which would be your safe zone."

Under the Fire Brigade Services Act, the fire command has control of any active scene. Any police services attending the scene are seconded to their command until the fire is extinguished and it becomes a crime scene. In the Boksburg incident, the primary goal of the police would have been to assist in creating the cordon.

However, according to eyewitness accounts and ISS incident logs, by the time the tanker exploded, no police had arrived on the scene at all. ISS records indicate police only arrived 50 minutes after the truck had exploded.

"It's a serious situation," said Campbell. "But also, SAPS needed to be there on the scene. EMPD [Ekurhuleni Metropolitan Police Department] becomes the backup of SAPS, and according to the reports that I have got, EMPD had arrived after SAPS, because SAPS have to contain the situation."

Questions also arise as to why firefighters on the scene dedicated their efforts to attempting to extinguish the fire with merely two vehicles, and why the cordon was set so close to the tanker itself.

The firefighters on the scene would have received hazardous materials training at some point in their careers, said Midgley. However, there is no legally mandated continuous professional development within the Fire Services, which means that the last training they received on such fires might have been many years previously.

Efforts to investigate the actions of the fire incident commander on the scene, as well as to gain access to the communications of the firefighters on the day via PAIA requests were rejected by the City of Ekurhuleni, citing ongoing criminal investigations.

Campbell placed the primary responsibility on the operator of the tanker itself — Infinite Transport Group.

"It is difficult to say where the blame lies after the events, but leading up to the event, that is solely the doorstep of the company," said Campbell.

"Firstly, they should have never been on that road… Secondly, according to the national legislation… transportation of any hazardous material has to be reported to your local authority, which is EMPD. We have checked: no reports have been given in to EMPD."

Campbell also placed some responsibility on the onlookers themselves. "There's an accident on the highway, the first thing you do is slow down and have a look. If something like this happens, you want to see what is going on."

Several elderly people are evacuated after fears of an underground gas line leak arose, caused an explosion from a gas tanker which left several dead and scores injured on Saturday morning, 24 December 2022.
Photo: Shiraaz Mohamed.

No victim support

In the immediate aftermath of the disaster, harrowing stories about the victims emerged. Many citizens of the community of Boksburg from every background were affected.

One family lost four children in the explosion. Many lost breadwinners. Tambo Memorial Hospital, less than 100m from the epicentre of the explosion, saw 11 health workers killed and millions of rands in damage to the facility.

"My children miss her a lot," says a visibly upset Samuel. "It's a part of my heart. There is nothing for me that I am happy with.

"People came here with empty promises. They come into our home, with the little that we have… they just come with their empty promises and then they go."

"I will never forget that day," said one witness, who asked to remain anonymous.

"I don't think my Christmases will be the same after this… I have a brother who passed away… he got blown away. He was just a couple of metres from me, under the trees. His eyeball was out, his stomach was blown away… He exploded. He literally exploded."

A fireman walks across the road close to where a gas tanker exploded on Saturday morning, 24 December 2022, leaving several dead and scores injured. Photo: Shiraaz Mohamed.

Read more in Daily Maverick: Families and friends of victims of Boksburg gas tanker explosion share their heartache and trauma

The Department of Health and the Gauteng government hosted funerals and memorials for the victims of the explosion, with strong commitments by the city and provincial representatives that there would be justice and consequences for this tragedy.

On 9 January, Campbell confirmed a meeting on the status of the investigation and committed that a final report would be presented to the council before the end of that month.

On 18 January, Gauteng Premier Panyaza Lesufi issued a statement confirming that the police investigation into the explosion had been concluded and that the matter had been referred to the senior state prosecutor for consideration, with another case having been opened against the driver.

The Gauteng premier's office referred queries about the status of the investigation to the police.

On 31 January, the police docket was confirmed to have been handed to the National Prosecuting Authority (NPA) for a decision to prosecute.

On 22 June, the NPA confirmed to *Daily Maverick* that the NPA no longer had the docket and that it had been referred back to the SAPS to conclude outstanding investigations.

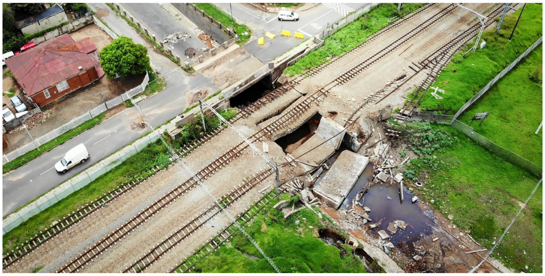
The same day, police spokesperson Brigadier Brenda Muridili confirmed there were no updates, but that the investigation had been handed over to the NPA.

Booth, representing the driver, Innovative Staffing Solutions and Infinite Fleet Transport, stated that their clients had engaged the services of a forensic expert and were cooperating with the investigation.

In response to *Daily Maverick*, Booth stated the following:

"Our clients have at all times cooperated with the police in their investigation as we believe that neither the driver nor ISS nor Infinite are criminally responsible pertaining to the tragic events that took place on the 24th of December 2022. As such, we firmly believe that there is no criminal liability on their part with regard to the incident or the deaths or any of those who died as a result of the said explosion."

A crime scene expert stands besides several bodies after a gas tanker exploded on Saturday morning, 24 December 2022, leaving several dead and scores injured. Photo: Shiraaz Mohamed.



A scene of devastation where the tanker exploded in Boksburg on Christmas Eve last year can be seen from an aerial view on 21 February 2023. The explosion left 41 people dead and dozens injured. Photo: Yeshiel Panchia

The people of Boksburg

With no concrete progress regarding the investigation and little surety that it will bring consequences, the actions of Boksburg residents on the day stand out.

"We are quite proud of our community. They pulled together quite nicely," says Boksburg resident Rolf Bjornstad, who helped injured community members on the day.

His house is 200m from where the explosion occurred. "We've got an old age home next door to us, and the whole staff came out and assisted. The community was amazing, absolutely amazing."

As the investigation into the Boksburg tanker explosion continues, the community is still grappling with the aftermath of the tragedy.

The incident has exposed a series of failures — from the driver's decision to attempt to pass under a low bridge, to the lack of adequate signage, to the delayed and inadequate response from emergency services. It has also raised serious questions about the regulations and procedures for the transport of hazardous materials, and the need for stricter enforcement to prevent similar incidents.

"My mom died a miserable death," says Margaret's son. "She wasn't going to the tavern. My mom wasn't going to visit a friend. She was going to work."

For the victims and their families, the quest for answers continues six months later, with no clear end in sight. **DM**

Boksburg | Infinite Fleet Transport | Innovative Staffing Solutions | Tambo Memorial Hospital | tanker explosion | Yeshiel Panchia

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All Comments 6

Ricky Rocker 26 June 2023 at 16:40

Unbelievably sad, and in my opinion indicative at all levels of the lows to which our society has sunk.

The rule is simple: to use first world technologies, we need to adhere to first world safety standards. Government, companies, emergency services, everyone.

If we don't, this is just the beginning…

Paul Botha 27 June 2023 at 07:36
What was missing was a lot of common sense by all parties and the tragic accident could have been avoided.

Julie M 27 June 2023 at 09:35
Such a sad, tragic story. But, well done DM on this investigation – it's insightful and sensitively explores the causes from multiple angles.

Would be great to see follow up stories too – what is causing the emergency call centres not to answer; is there a shortage of firefighters/trucks – why; what is the municipality doing to place new signs?

Sue Hutchings 27 June 2023 at 10:05
Our emergency services are completely and utterly hopeless. And I doubt any lessons were learnt from this tragedy.

> *Peter Markson* 27 June 2023 at 16:42
> Sue, it's not just the emergency services that are completely and utterly hopeless. I don't think space allows me to list all the state owned and municipal run services that are mostly just as hopeless and totally dysfunctional. This is ANC modus operandi after all.

robscott 27 June 2023 at 17:58
And still no accountability – like everything else. If I started named them I would fill a dozen pages.

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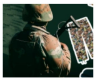

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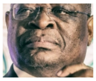

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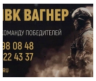

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