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The Ficksburg moment is a dangerous one for SA

**Speech delivered by Professor Crain Soudien, Deputy Vice-Chancellor of the
University of Cape Town, at the protest against police brutality
organised by the Students Representative Council on 5 May 2011**

I would like to thank the SRC for having organised this event today and to say that I bring the apologies of the Vice-Chancellor, Dr Max Price. I also bring to this meeting the full support of the Executive of the University of Cape Town.

The Executive wishes to place on record its dismay and disappointment with what happened at Ficksburg. We were deeply shocked and saddened by what all of us saw on television. At an emotional level we are saddened because Andries Tatane was one of our own. He was a student here in Engineering in 1998. But whether he was a student here or not should not determine whether and how we express ourselves on this matter.

We should be outraged just as ordinary people at what happened in Ficksburg. But we should be especially concerned, and even outraged, because what happened touches on questions which are at the heart of what we do here in the university. The university is a very special place. Its primary function, particularly a public university, is to prepare all of us to come to uphold and to exemplify the values of a democracy. In the way in which it works, it's a place where we practice, every day, what it means to live and behave in democratic kinds of ways. Central to this is unconditional respect for others, the unconditional right of people to associate with whom they want, their unconditional right to dignity, and critically, their unconditional right to express themselves freely.

Why is this so important? It is important because it allows us to be different and to know, in our differences, that we will never be punished because of this. People might not like the way I look, what I say, but they will defend my right to be different. We build trust in each other this way. I need to trust that you won't hit me when you disagree with me. One of the purposes of a university is to understand how societies work with these values, to understand through our teaching, our research, how these rights can be deepened, to understand what is happening when these rights are placed under threat. And where they are threatened, to speak out. This is what we tried to do during the dark days of apartheid. But it also needs to be what we ought to be doing now in the present.

In terms of this, in terms of understanding ourselves as a university, what we saw at Ficksburg was deeply distressing. The police as a public service, as a public institution, is fundamentally about preserving these rights. What it did was not only implicate itself in the taking of a life, but in the taking of an idea, the idea of a democracy, the idea of trust. In the way the police there behaved, they were trying to define for us what the values of our democracy should be. Those values are essentially the values of intolerance. This is why the Ficksburg moment is such a dangerous one in our country. It emphasises the idea that you must violently, with violence, stamp out, erase, eliminate those with whom you disagree. We must reject this view.

Andries Tatane was not a "trouble-maker". In some ways, the manner in which he was said to have conducted himself was what a university would want to promote. He stood up for the very rights that I have spoken to you about. And he died for this. That he died is a signal to us that we need to redouble our efforts here in the university. It is for this reason that we want to say to those who make decisions about how police conduct themselves, that we are deeply disappointed and demand not only that the law takes its course here, as it thankfully is, but that those who are appointed to protect our freedoms and our rights give us the unconditional assurance that they will not do anything again in the future that undermines our trust in them.

ENDS

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