

## Court Hears Of Museum Director's Arrest

Written by Rudi Prinsloo  
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The director of the SA National Museum of Military History on Wednesday described his shock and anger after being arrested for alleged illegal arms possession.

The alleged unlawful arrest and detention of the museum's director, John Keene, and two of its curators, Richard Henry and Susanne Blendulf, in 2005 has resulted in the three claiming almost R1.9 million damages from the ministers of Safety and Security and Defence.

Keene lost the sight in one of his eyes and Blendulf suffered from post traumatic stress disorder allegedly as a result of the arrests.

All three were arrested, kept in "filthy" police cells overnight and only released the next day after the director of public prosecutions refused to prosecute them.

Keene, who was still recuperating from an eye operation, had to be rushed to hospital for emergency surgery, but was kept shackled to his hospital bed for most of the day.

Arts and Culture Minister Pallo Jordan and top delegates of his department, as well as the CEO of Northern Flagship Institution (under which the three national museums fall) were all present when members of the police and military police descended on the military museum in Saxonwold, Johannesburg, in January 2005.

Acting Pretoria High Court Judge L Sapire remarked that it was "extraordinary" that people of such high rank were involved.

He also remarked that the arrest, as described by Keene, was "completely bizarre".

Keene testified that he had rushed to the museum after being informed that the defence force had come to fetch their armoured vehicles.

On his arrival, he found Jordan, accompanied by the director and deputy director general of the department, on the steps.

He found one of his curators, Richard Henry, outside, who informed him he had been arrested.

A member of the military police then read Keene's rights to him before a police captain, Fanie Malapo, aggressively told Keene they were going to confiscate the museum's small arms collection because they did not have permits and their accreditation (exempting the museum from licensing) was "absolutely worthless".

Keene said the museum kept a full register of its exhibits, which had mostly been donated by the defence force, its predecessors and the police since 1942, and had also gone through a lengthy accreditation process.

The Auditor General had conducted a full audit of the museum every year until 1999, when the

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audits suddenly stopped without explanation.

He stressed that it was the function and duty of museums to maintain or restore its acquisitions - in this case military equipment and arms.

Keene said he found his arrest "completely unbelievable" and was very anxious, especially when he was refused access to his attorney and driven to the police station at such high speeds that he thought they were going to crash.

At the police station, he was given documents to sign and locked up in a cockroach-infested cell that "stank to high heaven" of faeces and urine.

"My wife was virtually hysterical. She said unless I had my medicine in my eye, I would go blind. She asked them to summon the district surgeon but they just ignored her.

"... I was resigned to the fact that I would probably lose my eye. I was angry, anxious, tired and in severe pain," he said.

It was only after Keene's attorney brought a doctor to see him that an ambulance was summoned and he was taken to the eye institute in the early hours of the morning for emergency surgery.

Keene testified that he had always been very proud of working at the museum, which he regarded as one of the most renowned military museums in the world.

"After the arrest I felt embarrassed and that the museum (which is also a memorial to World War II soldiers) had been desecrated," he said.

"They took four of the exhibits (armoured vehicles) away. I have no idea what happened to the vehicles.

"My staff is like a family to me. They look up to me for protection, leadership and guidance and I could do nothing to help me. It made me feel totally impotent and useless."

The matter continues.

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