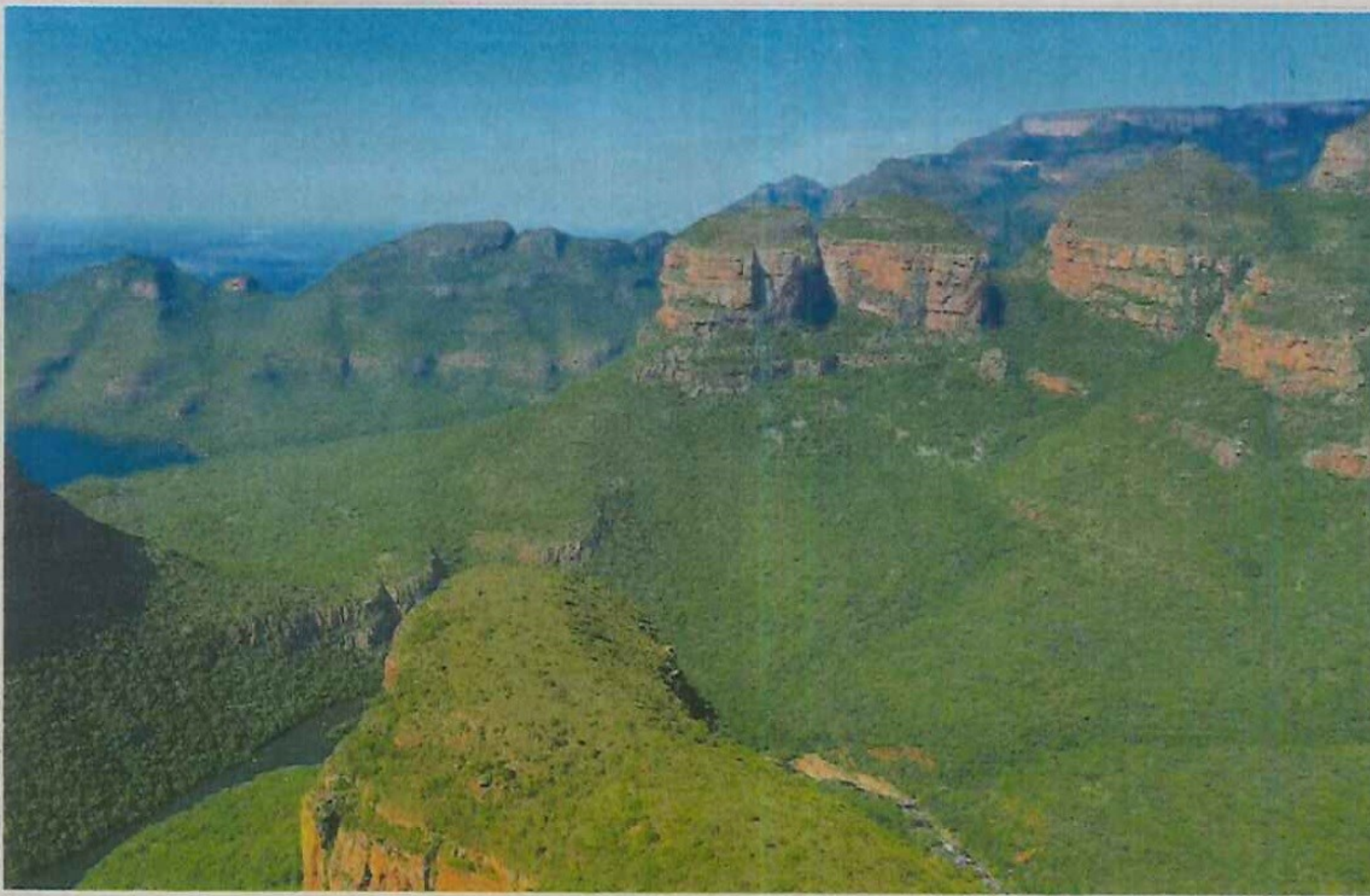




Tourist security the top priority

Thobile Mlangeni

MBOMBELA - During past weeks, the media reported on some cases of tourists being hijacked around Mpumalanga.

"We can confirm that such robberies have occurred during the past six months, but no tourist has been injured or raped during the hijacking incidents as some of the social media posts falsely claimed," said Brig Leonard Hlathi, spokesperson of SAPS Mpumalanga.

According to Hlathi, SAPS is deeply concerned about the fact that the robbers impersonate law enforcement officers, as well as the potential impact these incidents have on tourism in the region. "The provincial commissioner, Lt Gen Mondli Zuma, has

since established a specialist forum within SAPS Mpumalanga to focus on keeping tourists safe."

Johannes Nobunga, CEO of Mpumalanga Tourism and Parks Agency (MTPA) and chairperson of the Joint Provincial Tourism Safety Forum, confirmed that a holistic tourism safety plan has been rolled out with the aim to stop further robberies.

The plan is a result of a memorandum of understanding between the Mpumalanga Tourism and Parks Agency, Kruger Lowveld Chamber of Business and Tourism (KLCBT), Tourism Business Council of South Africa, the South African Police Service, local governments and the House of Traditional Leaders.

The strategy provides for additional patrols by law enforcement and private

security companies on the affected routes, the installation of surveillance cameras, deployment of additional SAPS members to the area, as well as adequate funding for overtime to extend shifts of SAPS members. Specialists in crime intelligence and specialist detectives have also been deployed to the area.

Hlathi further commented that the tourist victim support programme of Kruger Lowveld Tourism, supported by the MTPA, has been instrumental not only in providing comprehensive victim support, but also in obtaining valuable information from the victims that could lead to the successful identification and arrest of the perpetrators.

This collaboration and efforts by all

concerned have produced sufficient information that led to the positive identification of at least two crime kingpins.

Meanwhile,

warrants of arrest have been issued and all members of law enforcement and civilians at strategic points will soon be issued with colour photographs and full identity details of the suspects. "All teams and members of SAPS are relentless in their efforts to put these individuals behind bars and this can happen very soon," Hlathi concluded.

"The affected tourists were encouraged to continue with their tours, and most of them did, except those who were already on their way back. There is no need for anyone to reconsider their travel plans, but like anywhere in the world, we urge caution when travelling after dark," said Oupa Pilane, president of KLCBT.

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