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Commuters hope for end to taxi confusion

TENSE taxi commuters will find out this morning whether a week-long minibus taxi boycott has been called off, following confusion among drivers over the weekend, with some resuming normal services.

The SA Taxi Drivers' Union said it would decide today, after a critical meeting with the Johannesburg City Council, traffic department, police and ANC and Cosatu officials, whether to call off a protest that had crippled city centre businesses.

But a breakaway section of the drivers, supported by the SA Black Taxi Association (Sabta), resumed operations at the weekend in defiance of the union decision

RAY HARTLEY

on Thursday.

Council management committee transport chairman Paul Asherson estimated yesterday that the protest might have cost the taxi industry as much as R10m in lost revenues in the Johannesburg area.

Asherson called for a halt to the issuing of taxi permits after weekend reports that Johannesburg Road Transportation Board officials were suspended following a corruption probe into the issuing of permits. He said the unrestrained issuing of permits had forced the taxi industry to grow and prompted much of the conflict in the

industry.

Taxi industry representatives and municipal officials needed to be represented on the board to shape taxi policy in the area.

Asherson said he was concerned about a section of the taxi drivers who were "sing-ing off their own songsheet" and were not represented formally by existing taxi bodies, because it was difficult to communicate with them.

Taxis appeared to be operating normally in the Johannesburg area at the weekend, although police reported that a taxi driver was ordered by gunmen to return to Eldorado Park on Saturday morning.

☐ To Page 2

Friday 8/2/93

Taxi

The breakaway drivers reportedly decided at a meeting with owners at the weekend to begin ferrying commuters again, because demands for the release of impounded vehicles and those arrested in last week's protest had been met.

At the weekend the union proposed a four-point plan to resolve the crisis. Sapa reports.

It suggested the council impose a moratorium on fines issued to taxi drivers for picking up commuters randomly until the council demarcated minibus stopping bays in the city centre.

The plan also proposed a joint taxi driver, city council and taxi owner association forum which would draw up an educational programme to improve commuter safety and a code of conduct for taxi drivers. An ombudsman to protect the interests of the general public was also proposed.

Today's meeting is also expected to look

☐ From Page 1

into demands for an end to police interference in disputes between taxi drivers and authorities and "harrassment" by traffic and police officers.

Officials from parties to the talks spent Friday in caucus meetings to prepare the way for a major breakthrough today. ANC PWV spokesman Ronnie Mamoepa said.

Cosatu official Sam Shilowa has said once the immediate issues related to the protest have been solved, the union will look into establishing some form of collective bargaining with taxi owners.

On Saturday the PAC called on all people involved in the Johannesburg taxi crisis "not to aggravate tensions among the oppressed".

PAC spokesman Mark Shinnars said those involved in the crisis should explore all avenues of communication to achieve their objectives.

☒ See Page 3