

Cost of defending their land, homes and the environment

Community rights defenders continue to be attacked

COMMENT

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WE PEN this reflection with a hollowness deep inside our beings. Some of the groundWorkers met MaFikile, others only heard her stories, but as we write this, sadness overwhelms us.

I still remember my first encounter with Fikile Ntshangase.

It was two years ago at a gathering in Somkhele where Minister Gwede Mantashe visited the area as part of his mining roadshow and also made an unwelcome attempt to avoid engaging directly with the community.

Inside a fully packed marquee the heat was oppressive and the community's years of frustration and anger seemed to have reached a boiling point at that moment in time.

But what drew the media attention was Ntshangase and the two water bottles in her arms.

"These samples are from my water tank at home, look," she said. At closer inspection, visible to the naked eye, the water had tiny coal dust particles.

Ntshangase was not only speaking from a lived experience but she had brought the evidence for all to see.

Here was a representation of everyday life struggle that was true and real. For her this was environmental and climate injustice, a lived experience now because of a coal company. Not an experience way off in the future.

On Thursday October 22, Ntshangase was brutally assassinated by unknown men at her home in the village of Phondweni, in Somkhele in the north of KwaZulu-Natal.

She was gunned down in the presence of her grandchild. She was a former teacher and the vice-chair of MCEJO (Mfolozi Community Environmental Justice Organisation) a community organisation that is resisting the expansion of the Tendele Coal mine.

A few days before the attack she had complained to some fellow activists of her dogs barking constantly at night.

On Friday, October 23, various civil society organisations issued a joint statement on the incident, and by that evening it had made headline news.

On Tuesday, October 27, groundWork and Friends of the Earth SA addressed a letter to President Cyril Ramaphosa and Police Minister Bheki Cele requesting a "speedy and urgent investigation to arrest and put on trial those responsible for the



FIKILE Ntshangase, deputy chairperson of the Mfolozi Community Environmental Justice Organisation, was murdered amid claims of death threats and bullying by those in favour of the expansion of Somkhele Coal Mine, which requires the relocation of 21 families, which Ntshangase opposed. | African News Agency (ANA) archives

murder of Mama Fikile Ntshangase".

As I write this more than a week later, groundWork has yet to receive an acknowledgement of the correspondence.

Eventually we had to hand-deliver the correspondence to the KwaZulu-Natal Provincial Commissioner, on Tuesday, November 3.

The murder of MaFikile was foretold. In August 2018, the SA Human Rights Commission released a scathing report, titled "National Hearing on the Underlying Socio-economic Challenges of Mining-affected Communities in South Africa", stating that the government was responsible for the harm done to mining-affected communities because of its "failure to monitor compliance, poor enforcement, and a severe lack of co-ordination". This report also focused on the Somkhele area.

This was followed by another report in 2019 by Human Rights Watch, the Centre for Environmental Rights, Earthjustice, and groundWork calling on all national government agencies, including the Office of the President to "ensure that law enforcement authorities impartially, promptly, and thoroughly investigate any allegations or attacks, threats and harassment against community rights defenders and the wider community, for exercising their rights to freedom of expression, assembly and protest, and adopt a plan that would address the failure to adequately investigate such cases".

Sadly, we come to the painful realisation that the country was warned, and yet we allowed the death of MaFikile to be the inevitable outcome.

When the Tendele coal mine arrived in Somkhele in 2007, the community believed that their lives

were going to change for the better. Little did they know the truth about how mines treat communities. When families were relocated to make way for the mine, small and poor quality houses were built for them with small yards, making it difficult for them to do small-scale farming, a very important source of livelihood. The situation drove them to desperate poverty. Lack of water – most of it was used by the mine to wash coal – compounded their desperation. But it didn't end there, graves were relocated by the mine with insufficient compensation made to the families.

It became even more heart-breaking when some graves were not marked, which made it hard for families to identify where their loved ones had been laid to rest.

As such, this made it difficult for families to perform their rituals to their ancestors, according to their beliefs. This would affect their lives as their future relied on their connections with their ancestors.

Around 2013, the Somkhele community started protesting against the mine and the local traditional leadership about their problems related to the mine.

In 2016 – the same year Bazooka Rhadebe was assassinated – one of the Somkhele activists' car was burnt when he protested against the mine.

The mine also employed a counter-strategy by making half payment to the families who had signed and agreed to be relocated and promised to pay them the balance as soon as the other resisting families agreed. This was a mechanism designed to divide the people, and incite and perpetuate violence in the community.

After this move by the mine, people who challenged the mine started



receiving threats and intimidations via phone calls and SMSes. In April this year, one activist was held at gunpoint in his house in front of his family.

In the same month, another family who refused to sign the relocation agreement found their home riddled with about 19 bullets at night. Fortunately no one died.

The situation in Somkhele needs to be closely monitored and observed as it seems to be increasingly volatile. Activists have previously complained about threats and violence they face to suppress or silence them.

At her memorial service in Somkhele, MaFikile was remembered as an active educator and a firm and fierce environmental activist who stood by her people and their rights until her last breath.

It has now become even more clear that mining in communities like Somkhele does not only bring with it water supply shortages, water and air pollution, land and soil destruction but also violence, death, and abuse.

Just like Ken Saro-Wiwa and his friends died at the hands of Sonny Abacha and Shell in the Niger Delta, "Bazooka" Radebe who was killed in Xolebeni, in the Eastern Cape, and Berta Caceres of Honduras lost her life in defence of her family and neighbourhood, Ntshangase's life will serve to reinforce community resistance and inspire other communities around the country too.

MaFikile today is with the ancestors, not only from this area, but with the many who have died because they have tried to defend their land, livelihoods and their environments.

Global Witness, an organisation which monitors Human Rights, Land and Environmental defenders globally, gives us the sad hard evidence that MaFikile was not alone.

In July they released their Annual Report, which stated that in 2019, 212 people were murdered globally for peacefully defending their homes and standing up to the destruction of nature.

This is four people every week.

The question that was asked at the memorial, "why are pro-mining advocates never murdered?" is what needs to be answered by the State and the people.

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