

25 March 2022

South Africa: Killing of land rights defender Ayanda Ngila and targeting of Abahlali baseMjondolo

On 8 March 2022, land rights defender and member of the grass-roots movement **Abahlali baseMjondolo**, **Ayanda Ngila**, was shot and killed by four armed men. At the time of the shooting, the human rights defender had been working on repairing an irrigation pipe in the eKhenana community garden. The gunmen fled the scene through the river. A suspect has been detained for questioning by the Cato police.

[Ayanda Ngila](#) was the deputy chairperson of Abahlali baseMjondolo in eKhenana community, an informal settlement near Durban. [Abahlali baseMjondolo](#) is a well established grass-roots movement that has been operating across South Africa for more than 20 years. The objective of the movement is to defend and protect the rights of people living in shacks including access to decent housing, services and education. The movement works to advance and promote the interests of the poor and marginalized. Due to their peaceful work in defence of human rights Abahlali baseMjondolo and its members have long been targeted by the local leaders of the political party ANC.

On 8 March 2022, land rights defender Ayanda Ngila was shot and killed by four armed men while working with community members to repair an irrigation pipe in the eKhenana community garden. The gunmen fled the scene through the river before the police arrived. No investigation has been opened into the killing, despite one of the witnesses reportedly identifying one of the shooters as the son of a local leader of the ANC. Abahlali baseMjondolo and its members have long been targeted due to their peaceful work in defence of human rights.

On 19 November 2017, human rights defender [Sibonelo Patrick Mpeku](#) was dragged from his shack and stabbed to death by an unknown assailant. No investigations into this killing were opened. On 17 December 2017, Soyiso Nkqayini was shot and [killed](#) by unknown men while Smanga Mkhize was left seriously injured from the same attack. On 11 January 2018, human rights defender [Sandile Biyela](#) was killed while police officers and security guards were using live ammunition during a land rights protest at Solomon Mahlangu.

On 17 March 2021, human rights defenders Ayanda Ngila, **Lindokuhle Mnguni** and **Landu Tshazi**, also members of Abahlali baseMjondolo, were working in the communal garden when they were illegally arrested and detained at the Westville Prison. Only after the intervention of the South African Human Rights Commission did the defenders get access to their lawyers. After six months in detention, the defenders were charged with the murder of an eKhenana community member. **Mqapheli Bonono**, the deputy president of Abahlali baseMjondolo, and two other defenders **Sniko Miya** and **Maphiwe Gasela** were also arrested and detained soon after in relation to the same case. They were charged separately with “conspiracy to murder a witness”. On 29 September 2021, the defenders were found not guilty as the prosecution lacked evidence linking them to the unfortunate incident. In October 2021, the charges against the Mqapheli Bonono and his co-accused were all withdrawn.

On 8 October 2021, women human rights defenders and members of Abahlali baseMjondolo **Maphiwe Gasela** and **Phumelele Mkhize** were arrested. The two women defenders were charged with “assault with intent to cause grievous bodily harm” in relation to an incident that Abahlali baseMjondolo said was in defence of a migrant whom was being assaulted by another woman in

the community in April last year. On 25 October, Gasela and Mkhize were each granted R500 bail. That same day, the homes of women human rights defenders Maphiwe Gasela and Phumelele Mkhize were burned down. Witnesses reportedly saw the Ntokozo Ngubane, the daughter of a leader of the ANC branch in the area, walking through the commune on the day of the fires with the woman who allegedly assaulted the migrant and a few others associated with the ANC. They were reportedly carrying a 2.5-litre container filled with a liquid which witnesses assume was petrol.

On 6 March 2022, Maphiwe Gasela, a member of the movement, was approached and threatened by an individual, who was later identified by witnesses as one of the gunmen in the killing of Ayanda Ngila. This same assailant reportedly attacked Sniko Miya with an axe. Despite this attack being caught on camera the police have not made any arrests and no investigation has been opened.

Front Line Defenders condemns the killing of Ayanda Ngila and remains deeply concerned by the relentless targeting of Abahlali baseMjondolo and its members as it believes these acts are intended to have an intimidating effect on the human rights defenders and their community.

Front Line Defenders urges the authorities of South Africa to:

1. Strongly condemn the killing of Ayanda Ngila and the targeting of members of Abahlali baseMjondolo;
2. Carry out an immediate, thorough and impartial investigation into the killing of Ayanda Ngila, with a view to publishing the results and bringing those responsible to justice in accordance with international standards;
3. Take measures to ensure that government officials or other public figures refrain from making statements or declaration stigmatising the legitimate work of human rights defenders;
4. Guarantee in all circumstances that all human rights defenders in South Africa are able to carry out their legitimate human rights activities without fear of reprisals and free of all restrictions;
5. Cease targeting all human rights defenders in South Africa and guarantee in all circumstances that they are able to carry out their legitimate human rights activities without fear of reprisals and free of all restrictions including judicial harassment.