

North West police commissioner appears before inquiry into Marikana massacre

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North West provincial police commissioner Lt. General Zukiswa Mbombo testified last Thursday before the Farlam commission of inquiry that police did not expect mineworkers to be killed in police operations during the August 2012 strike at Marikana.

On August 16, 2012, 34 people, mostly striking miners, were shot dead and 78 people wounded when police fired on a group gathered at a hill near the Lonmin mine. Police in armoured vehicles ran over people and hunted down and executed victims in the surrounding area. Shortly after the shootings, President Jacob Zuma established the commission to whitewash the deaths.

Contrary to Mbombo's remarks, a detailed October 24, 2013 *Daily Maverick* report by Greg Nicolson and Greg Marinovich states, "It was always improbable that the killing of 34 and wounding of 78 miners at Marikana could have simply been an unforeseen consequence of the police's desire to see law and order prevail... What is now clear is that the infamous Cyril Ramaphosa e-mails 24 hours before the massacre calling for 'concomitant action' against 'criminals' by the police was not an isolated act of political interference... The Marikana operation can be seen as an action by a mercenary force at the behest of powerful people in and outside the ruling African National Congress [ANC]."

Nicholson and Marinovich explain how, two days before the massacre, Mbombo discussed the crisis in a recorded and transcribed meeting with Lonmin executive vice president of human relations and external affairs, Barnard Mokoena. The striking miners were refusing to descend from the hillock overlooking the mine until management agreed to wage talks.

The record of the conversation was discovered on a hard drive, along with other evidence that the South

African Police Service (SAPS) conceals from their representation at the commission. The SAPS suppress this information in an attempt to uphold the lie that they have acted lawfully, above reproach, and most importantly, under no political influence. According to Nicholson and Marinovich, "The police had over a year ago [in 2012] subpoenaed evidence from Lonmin before preparing their own submission to the commission. They were well aware of the existence of the recording and transcript of that meeting."

In the transcript, Mbombo mentions that Police Minister Nathi Mthethwa had complained to her of the pressure he was under from Ramaphosa. This is to be seen against the backdrop of the violent strikes at Impala Platinum (Implats) in 2012. Nicholson and Marinovich state, "[T]he perception [was] that [Implats] and police were... supporting the striking workers who in turn were seen as wanting to get rid of the [ANC-aligned] National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) and install the [rival] Association of Mineworkers and Construction Union (AMCU)."

At that time, Ramaphosa was chairing the ANC internal disciplinary committee of appeals which upheld the leader of the ANC's youth league, Julius Malema's expulsion from the party. It was important for Ramaphosa's circle to head off the Marikana strike before Malema made further political capital at the expense of himself and ANC leader Jacob Zuma. In the transcript, Mbombo recalls her discussions with her senior, national Police Commissioner Riah Phiyega. She says they agreed that they cannot allow "Malema [to] come and defuse [the Marikana situation], so that it becomes as if Malema has taken charge..."

After discussing possible action against the miners with Mokoena, Mbombo asserts that 480 policemen will be on duty on the following day. She further states,

“Tomorrow when we go there for the second time, now that we were there today and they did not surrender, then it is blood.”

Contrast this malice with her most recent comments before the Farlam Commission: “We did not want to see any bloodshed. We did not want anyone to die. We knew that these people were armed and had already killed certain people but we were not hoping for bloodshed.”

Mbombo was being re-examined by Advocate Ishmael Semenya, for the SAPS. After testifying, she asked to address the commission. “To all the people who lost their loved ones,” she said, “to those who were injured, I want to say the police have a responsibility to protect. Killing people is not an intention of the police.”

At this point, some relatives of the victims rose and left the auditorium at the Tshwane municipal chambers.

None of this inhibited many South African media outlets from uncritically depicting Mbombo as having extended an olive branch to families of the victims. Mainstream journalism is as usual firmly in the corner of its paymasters, the ruling class, for whose continued enrichment “these people”, the “dastardly criminals” at Marikana, had to be shown that preserving profit takes precedence over preserving human life.

The charge of contempt for human life is supported by the fact that police at Marikana were issued with 4,000 R5 semi-automatic rifle rounds. What is more, in the words of Nicholson and Marinovich, “[F]rom early morning after this meeting [between Mbombo and Mokoena], the police repeatedly requested the local state mortuary in Rustenburg to send four mortuary vans.”

Advocate Dali Mpofu, for the mineworkers, has already called for Mbombo to be charged with murder. “Had you not given the instructions [to police officers] on the 13th and on the 16th [August 2012], those 39 persons who died on those two days might still have been alive today,” Mpofu said in a cross-examination of Mbombo on February 17. “That recommendation [to charge Mbombo with murder] should be made because you acted recklessly. I will argue that when there was an option for you to take action when there were fewer people on the koppie [hillock] you chose to do the operation when there was the highest number [of protesters].”

Mbombo is unlikely to face trial under a government which in fact sanctioned the massacre. When history does pronounce judgement, it will be not only on her and the SAPS, but also on the ANC.



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