

South Africa: Police open fire on Modimolle water protests

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South African police opened fire last week with rubber bullets on residents of Modimolle who had gathered to protest against water shortages amid the worst drought in recent memory.

Speaking to broadcaster EWN, the police's Lieutenant Ronel Otto confirmed that five people were injured in the Central Business District of Modimolle on February 19. She said she could not confirm "whether their injuries were caused by rubber bullets or just general protest actions."

The *Citizen* reported that at least one resident, Solomon Galane, was struck by a rubber bullet in the head. "I was trying to assist a lady who was shot and injured. As I was trying to hold her, police started shooting and hit me on the head," Galane told the *Citizen*.

Modimolle (previously Nylstroom) is a Limpopo province town primarily dependent on agriculture and farming, as well as wildlife and tourism. Its residents are among the 2.7 million households estimated to be facing water shortages across the country.

The town has been without piped water since December 14, while some surrounding areas have been without water for six months.

Protesters complained that for four months the council had ignored their objections to the discoloured, brackish water delivered to the area in tankers. "Now we are here to demand answers. Otherwise the management of the council should step down if they are failing," said community leader Alfred Maremane.

Residents from Phakgameng, Mandela and other peripheral settlements accused the Modimolle local municipality of discriminating against the poor. They held that the suburbs of Modimolle had clean water, while they had to make do with the inferior water from mobile tankers. Many have no option but to walk long

distances to draw water from taps at the municipal council offices.

The drought, which is concentrated in the provinces of the Free State, Limpopo, Mpumalanga and KwaZulu-Natal, has been described as the worst in more than a century. Lennox Mabaso, a spokesman for the KwaZulu-Natal provincial department of local government, told Al Jazeera in November that the drought was beginning to affect livelihoods and draining the economy. The ministry warned that about 6,500 rural communities across four provinces face water shortages.

During apartheid, South Africa's poor were largely left out of the infrastructure spending of the white supremacist regime. Now, many still have no running water thanks to the corruption and incompetence, both at the municipal and national government levels, that is a feature of the African National Congress's (ANC) pro-capitalist, post-apartheid regime.

Referring to the upgrades required in water infrastructure, Water and Sanitation Minister Nomvula Mokonyane blamed local authorities, saying, "The inability of municipalities to come up with concrete plans, and to spend even what has come from the Treasury directly to them, is a big headache."

In comments to TV channel eNCA, the minister continued, "However, we will never ever have a situation of water shedding [shut-offs]. It will never happen."

That was in early November, a time when certain undeveloped areas were already experiencing water restrictions.

National agricultural production has contracted by more than 42 percent, according to an analysis by the right-wing opposition Democratic Alliance-led Western Cape provincial government. Western Cape Member of

the Executive Committee for Economic Opportunities Alan Winde said last month, “This drop in production resulted in a 1.1 percent decrease in the country’s gross domestic production.”

The ANC government has been criticised for failing to declare the drought a national disaster. Late last year, Minister in the Presidency Jeff Radebe only acknowledged that “some funds will have to be moved around” to alleviate suffering due to the drought.

To date, seven of the country’s nine provinces have been declared disaster areas. The coyness over declaring a national disaster (which would trigger the release of emergency funds) is the ANC government’s way of telling ordinary people, farmers as well as consumers, it simply has no money for them. Radebe cited the sum of just R450 million (US\$29.22 million) to go towards government drought-relief efforts.

Recent rain showers have not been enough to break the drought. Nevertheless, Deputy Agriculture and Fisheries Minister Bheki Cele gleefully latched onto the rains to announce in parliament that South Africa would only have to import 3.8 million tons of maize, as opposed to the originally estimated 6 million tons.

GrainSA economist Wandile Sihlobo cautioned that import requirements might change yet. “It’s too early to have a clear view,” he said. “Much of the crop has been planted outside optimum areas...” Furthermore, all 2016 crop estimates are still at the mercy of the frosts expected in the middle of the year.

Mostly because of the drought, over the past three months, food prices have increased at eight times the rate they did in the same period the year before, according to research by the Pietermaritzburg Agency for Community Social Action (PACSA). In addition, the weak rand is causing retailers to price items higher.

While PACSA measures food inflation only in KwaZulu-Natal, their findings are echoed by the National Agricultural Marketing Council, which tracks food price trends across the country. The state body’s latest report shows that the cost of a basic food basket increased nearly 9 percent in nominal terms (excluding inflation) from December 2014 to last December.

Gwarega Mangozhe, chief executive of the Consumer Goods Council of South Africa, warned that the worst is yet to come, as the effects of the drought only started showing in food prices from August. “Retailers buy in advance in order to ensure price certainty. The forward

cover they take typically lasts for six to 11 months,” said Mangozhe. “As soon as these covers run out, we will start to see the real impact of food inflation.”



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