



BLOG | DEC. 14, 2020

“I cannot sell out my people. And if need be, I will die for my people.”



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[LAND AND ENVIRONMENTAL DEFENDERS](https://www.globalwitness.org/en/campaigns/environmental-activists/)

([HTTPS://WWW.GLOBALWITNESS.ORG/EN/CAMPAIGNS/ENVIRONMENTAL-ACTIVISTS/](https://www.globalwitness.org/en/campaigns/environmental-activists/))

Fikile Ntshangase’s cold-blooded murder must spark a global effort to better protect human rights, land and environmental defenders.

“I will miss her truth, her fire and courage.” These were the words of Kirsten Youens, one of the legal representatives of the community Fikile Ntshangase belonged to in KwaZulu-Natal. Fikile was a brave activist who was brutally killed (<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/oct/23/south-african-environmental-activist-shot-dead-in-her-home>) last month by four gunmen in her home in front of her 11-year-old grandson. (<https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2020-10-29-murdered-kzn-anti-mining-activist-fikile-ntshangase-to-be-buried-friday-as-dispute-rages/>)

In a country with alarming high levels of violence against women

(<https://edition.cnn.com/2020/06/19/africa/south-africa-gender-viole>

[intl/index.html](https://www.globalwitness.org)), the cold-blooded assassination of a well-known and **global witness** environmental and community rights activist and defender should have catalysed [unprecedented condemnation from the South African government](https://www.globalwitness.org). Yet there has been none. (<https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/11/02/letter-south-africa-department-police-support-prompt-thorough-and-impartial>)

Fikile was a strong and vocal opponent of the Somkhele coal mine on the border of one of Africa's oldest game park (<https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2020-10-29-murdered-kzn-anti-mining-activist-fikile-ntshangase-to-be-buried-friday-as-dispute-rages/>), Hluhluwe-iMfolozi in KwaZulu-Natal. She was a leading member of the Mfolozi Community Environmental Justice Organisation (MCEJO), which is taking legal action against the mine owners, Tendele Coal Mining Ltd., for allegedly infringing environmental standards and MCEJO is attempting to prevent the expansion of the mine further into the Mpunkyoni tribal area.

The mine Fikile was fighting against was described by The Global Environment Trust as causing “untold destruction of the environment and the homes and livelihoods of the residents of Somkhele” (<https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2020-11-01-fikile-ntshangase-i-will-die-for-my-people/>). Her mission went to the heart of so many battles around the world against devastating industrial expansion in the face of long-term environmental and economic sustainability.

The land, which was once used to graze goat and cattle, has been diminished. The park, which attracts tourists to the area and provides jobs, is reportedly impacted by the high level of dust and noise. Experts also link the dwindling population of white rhinos to the increase in the road network connected to the mine, with the area adjacent described as a “poaching hot spot”. (<https://news.mongabay.com/2020/10/south-african-activist-killed-as-contentious-coal-mine-seeks-to-expand/>) Tensions have also been stoked between those whose families are reliant on salaries paid by the mine and those whose livelihoods are dependent on the land. The phrase ‘a battle of life and death’ is over-used in the media, but for too many, this is exactly what this is. And for Fikile, it was a battle in the midst of which she was needlessly killed. After her assassination, reports emerged of anonymous threats directed at other community members there, and in other parts of South Africa too, where communities have said ‘no’ to mining, even successfully fighting for the legal right to do so. (<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-55002728>)

Tendele Coal Mining Ltd., which owns and operates the Somkhele mine, says that any

accusations that its mining plans are linked to Fikile's death are unfounded. Global Witness issued a statement sending condolences to her family, condemned "any form of intimidation in the strongest possible terms".

(<https://www.globalwitness.org>)

Globally, Fikile is one of hundreds of activists who have lost their lives, while trying to protect their land from what is alleged to be unlawful or non-consensual seizure by corporations, governments, investors, and other role-players.

Earlier this year, Global Witness published new research showing that 212 land and environmental defenders were murdered in 2019 (<https://www.globalwitness.org/en/campaigns/environmental-activists/defending-tomorrow/>) – the highest number of killings ever recorded in a single year. Mining and logging have consistently been shown to be the industries most likely to be linked with these cowardly and deadly attacks, although agribusiness (industrial farming and food production) is also implicated.

As countries around the world look towards 2021 and the COP26 Summit where new commitments will be made to address the climate crisis, it is vital that the brave activists and community members who are risking their lives to protect the land and our planet are not forgotten. Their murders must be properly investigated and prosecuted. Their stories are not always represented by the global climate movements we see marching through city centres or on the bulletins we hear on our radios. They are rarely alongside world leaders in the global meetings that make decisions about the actions that can be taken to stop global warming. But they are at the very frontline of efforts to save the planet. Their voices, those of their communities, their knowledge and experience should also be at the centre of the fight against disastrous climate breakdown.

For now, though, Fikile's family, friends and supporters continue working with her legal team to call for justice for her murder. It is vital that the world does not turn away from this fight.

Not long before she was killed, Fikile was reported to have said, "I cannot sell out my people. And if need be, I will die for my people."

We must therefore act to ensure that the relevant authorities properly investigate her murder; and prevent more killings by ensuring that the protection of land and environmental defenders is seen as interlinked with efforts to address the global climate crisis and the rights of communities to reject mining on their land. Without this, the harassment and assassinations will continue.

You can help by writing to the Presidency of South Africa to ask for progress of the murder investigation so that Fikile, her community and not forgotten. **global witness** (<https://www.globalwitness.org>)

Contact the Private Office of President Cyril Ramaphosa (<http://www.thepresidency.gov.za/content/contact-us>) through presidentrsa@presidency.gov.za (<mailto:presidentrsa@presidency.gov.za>)

Listing image credit: Rob Symons from Global Environmental Trust

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