

SA Primate on Marikana killings: "Too little done"

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Archbishop Thabo Makgoba

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"People's lives and their basic needs must be put first, before profits, politics, power and inter-union rivalries" - Archbishop Makgoba

By Bellah Zulu, ACNS

The Primate of Southern Africa has called for prompt action from all stakeholders on the first anniversary of the infamous Marikana shootings where 44 people died during a miners' strike.

In a statement issued today Archbishop Thabo Makgoba said, "Twelve months on from the Marikana shootings, we must acknowledge too little has been done in response to the terrible tragedy, both for those concerned, and for the life of the nation and our sense of who we are and who we want to become."

The Marikana miners' strike was a wildcat strike at a mine owned by Lonmin in Marikana, an area close to the city of Rustenburg in South Africa. The event received international attention following a series of violent clashes between the South African Police Service, Lonmin security, the Union leadership and strikers themselves.

During the past year the South African Council of Churches - of which the Anglican Church of Southern Africa is a member - and other partners have provided assistance to the bereaved, injured and traumatised.

"We've distributed food-parcels, clothing and other physical help – some of it donated from beyond the Christian family," the Archbishop said. "We have aimed to walk with all those affected, and to support whatever processes can promote healing and wholeness, further justice, and create new and better realities for going forward."

Archbishop Makgoba added that - despite the hard work, dedication and perseverance of many people - "We are a long way short of where we would like to be".

"We could also have worked harder to promote a national climate in which others too would have been encouraged to do more and act with greater urgency, and not only in Marikana."

The Marikana shootings have been described as a massacre by South African media and have been compared to the Sharpeville massacre of 1960 when black protesters rose against the white-minority government. The incident also took place on the 25th anniversary of a nationwide South African miners' strike.

President Jacob Zuma appointed a judicial inquiry, the Farlam Commission, to quickly probe the killings but one year later it is yet to deliver any findings and no one has been prosecuted, putting its credibility under intense scrutiny.

Abp Makgoba explained that within the wider mining sector and across other industries there are a range of longstanding underlying problems, which will only become worse with time: "There are lessons from Marikana all can learn, and actions to take which would benefit all stakeholders who must co-operate

"Yes, we must await the findings of the Farlam Commission, but this does not mean we do nothing as we wait."

The Archbishop urged all employers to "put their own houses in order" by ensuring decent living wages and working conditions as a higher priority than "social responsibility programmes that tend to address symptoms not causes."

He added, "Employers and unions should also find common ground in taking steps to uplift workers in other ways. What is being done to educate workers in managing their finances, the dangers of loan sharks, and sensible alternatives? How are we promoting honest, open debate about perhaps outdated employment practices for both migrant and local workers? How are we overcoming the vast skewedness of inequalities in wages?

"Yes, there are complexities, yes there are difficult histories, but we cannot let these become excuses for minimal action...If I sound naïve, it is because we can no longer play games. People's lives and their basic needs, must be put first, before profits, before politics, before power and before inter-union rivalries."

Tension between rival unions at the Lonmin-owned platinum mine has led to several shootings over the past year. On Monday this week, a female union official was shot dead at Marikana mine outside her home.

In the face of such challenges, the Archbishop remains hopeful and urged the rainbow nation to remember its 1994 vision of a "people-centred society".

"The shockwaves which ran through the nation arose from our conviction that such things should never happen, and our certainty that the life of our country should be better."

The Primate concluded with an earnest appeal for prayer for those affected by the tragic events of last year especially the bereaved, the injured and all who have been traumatised. He has since set aside Friday to Sunday this week as a period of persistent prayer for the situation in Marikana.

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