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Global human rights network condemns murder of Sibonelo Patrick Mpeku, calls for end to attacks against South African human rights defenders

New York, U.S.A. — On 6 December 2017, the largest global network of organizations devoted to achieving economic, social and environmental justice through human rights sent an urgent letter to President of South Africa Jacob Zuma calling for investigation into the murder of human rights defender Sibonelo Patrick Mpeku.

At 32-years-old, Mpeku was a member of Abahlali's KwaZulu/Natal Provincial Council and the chairperson of the local Sisonke Village branch of Abahlali baseMjondolo — an ESCR-Net member organization that promotes the human rights and dignity of impoverished and landless people living in South Africa's informal settlements. On Sunday, 19 November 2017, Mpeku was dragged from his home and stabbed in Sisonke Village, Lamontville, municipality of eThekweni, province of KwaZulu-Natal. ESCR-Net understands that this murder served as reprisal for his work to defend the human rights of the area's residents.

ESCR-Net recognized the murder as part of a wider trend of ongoing threats and attacks perpetrated against community leaders in the informal settlements in and around Durban, eThekweni municipality.

With particular concern at the apparent impunity following these acts, ESCR-Net observed that various threats levelled against the human rights defender had been reported to the area councillor, the ward committee, the Lamontville Police Station and offices of the governing political party, but no notable response by local authorities or the media was received. To date, no arrests have taken place with respect to Mr. Mpeku's murder.

Recalling South Africa's obligations as Party to both the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights, ESCR-Net called on President Zuma to ensure respect the right to life, freedom from cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment and freedoms of expression and assembly. Moreover, as party to the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, South Africa is obligated to uphold the right to an adequate standard of living for all — rights which Mpeku committed his life to defend.

ESCR-Net called on the South African government to ensure: a prompt, fair and impartial investigation that guarantees that the perpetrators will be brought to justice and protection of all shack-dwellers from acts of intimidation and violence as a result of their human rights work. ESCR-Net also called on South Africa to undertake all necessary steps to address corruption in the allocation of public housing, forced evictions and unlawful demolitions affecting residents in informal settlements and shantytowns. Referring to reports of reprisal, ESCR-Net asked President Zuma to ensure that the human rights of all persons are upheld without discrimination of any kind, including due to perceived or actual political party affiliation.

Mpeku's life was celebrated on Saturday, December 2, in a funeral attended by movement leaders. His legacy lives on through the continued work of Abahlali baseMjondolo, as they voiced their unending commitment to this work in a statement last week, "Repression has not stopped our struggle against oppression. We continue to build the democratic power of the impoverished from below."

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[Read more about ESCR-Net's request for urgent investigation into the murder of Sibonelo Patrick Mpeku and urgent action to protect human rights defenders here.](#)

ESCR-Net - International Network for Economic, Social and Cultural Rights is the largest global network of organizations and advocates devoted to achieving economic, social and environmental justice through human rights, consisting of over 280 organizational and individual members in more than 75 countries. Through ESCR-Net, groups and individuals can exchange information, develop a collective voice, amplify their actions, develop new tools and strategies. By facilitating joint actions, enhancing communications and building solidarity across regions, the network seeks to build a global movement to make human rights and social justice a reality for all.