

South Africa's Police Commissioner Defends Officers Who Fired on Miners



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Police officers surround the bodies of miners after opening fire on a crowd at the Lonmin platinum mine in South Africa on Thursday.

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By [LYDIA POLGREEN](#)

MARIKANA, South Africa — South Africa's police commissioner on Friday defended the actions of officers who opened fire on miners a day earlier in an episode that, she said, killed 34 people and wounded 78 during a wildcat strike at a platinum mine. The commissioner, Riah Phiyega, described a desperate struggle by the police to contain the machete-wielding crowd of thousands of angry miners who broke through two lines of defense, leaving officers with no choice but to open fire with live ammunition.



Photographs

[South African Police Open Fire on Striking Miners](#)



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The strike in Marikana has pitted the country's largest mine workers union against a radical upstart union demanding sharp increases in pay and faster action to improve the grim living and working standards for miners. [More Photos »](#)

"The militant group stormed towards the police firing shots and wielding dangerous weapons," Commissioner Phiyega said. Previous attempts by the 500-strong police force to repel them with rubber bullets, water cannons and stun grenades had failed, she said in an emotional news conference here. "This is no time for finger-pointing," Commissioner Phiyega said. "It is a time for us to mourn the sad and black moment we experienced as a country."

President [Jacob Zuma](#) cut short his trip to neighboring Mozambique for a regional summit to rush to the site of the bloody protest, some 60 miles northwest of Johannesburg. It was South Africa's worst labor-related violence since 1994.

The shooting left a field strewn with bodies and a deepening fault line between the governing African National Congress and a nation that, 18 years after the end of apartheid, is increasingly impatient with deep poverty, rampant unemployment and yawning inequality.

The police retrieved six guns from the protesters, including one that had been taken from a police officer who was hacked to death by the workers earlier in the week, Commissioner Phiyega said, as well as many machetes, cudgels and spears.

Earlier on Friday, speaking to a local talk radio station, South Africa's police minister, Nathi Mthethwa, had said that 30 people had been killed in the shooting.

In a scene replayed endlessly on television that reminded some South Africans of the days when the police of the apartheid government opened fire on protesters, heavily armed officers shot into a charging crowd of workers who walked off the job last Friday, demanding higher wages.

The strike has pitted the country's largest mine workers union, which is closely allied with the governing A.N.C., against a radical upstart union demanding sharp increases in pay and faster action to improve the grim living and working standards for miners.

The strike and the government's iron-fisted response are emblematic of the frustration with the slow pace of transforming South Africa's largely white-owned business establishment and the growing perception that the A.N.C. and its allies have become too cozy with big business. As a result, many people here, especially the young, have looked for more radical solutions.

"N.U.M. has deserted us," said one of the striking workers, who gave his name as Kelebone, referring to the older union, the [National Union of Mineworkers](#), by its abbreviation. "N.U.M. is working with the white people and getting money. They forgot about the workers."

Besides those killed on Thursday, 10 other people, including two police officers, had already died as a result of violence connected to the strike, which began on Aug. 10 when thousands of workers walked off the job, saying that their wages needed to be tripled.

Kelebone, who works as a winch operator, said he was paid about \$500 per month for difficult, dangerous work.

"We need more money," he said.

Like most of the workers who walked off the job last week, Kelebone, who is 28 and wears a long mane of dreadlocked hair, is a member of the Association of Mine Workers and Construction Union, a newer and more radical union. [Lonmin](#), the London-based company that operates the mine, shut down operations on Tuesday amid the violent strike.

For the past three days, workers with machetes, sticks and wooden cudgels occupied an outcropping of rock near the mine, chanting and dancing, pledging their readiness to die if their demands were not met.

"The struggle, the struggle, it will liberate us," they sang, shuffling in formation with their machetes held aloft.

Just before 4 p.m. on Thursday, after repeated warnings to the crowd of about 3,000 miners to disarm and disperse, the police began firing tear gas and water cannons to try to get them to leave, witnesses said. In video captured by several news organizations, the police appeared to fire upon a group of workers who charged toward them.

The police in post-apartheid South Africa have been [accused of using deadly strong-arm tactics](#) to suppress unrest before, but the action on Thursday surprised many South Africans and drew quick condemnation.

“Regardless of what police may argue about provocation, there is no possible justification for shooting into a crowd with rifles and handguns,” Frans Cronje of the [South African Institute of Race Relations](#) said on Twitter. Helen Zille, leader of the opposition [Democratic Alliance](#), called the shootings a massacre.

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Striking South African miners, armed with machetes and sticks, chant slogans on Thursday, near the Marikana mine in South Africa. [More Photos »](#)

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President Zuma condemned the violence but refrained from criticizing the police, saying in a statement that “there is enough space in our democratic order for any dispute to be resolved through dialogue without any breaches of the law or violence.” He said he had “instructed law enforcement agencies to do everything possible to bring the situation under control and to bring the perpetrators of violence to book.”

Frans Baleni, general secretary of the National Union of Mineworkers, defended the police in an interview with Kaya FM, a radio station.

“The police were patient, but these people were extremely armed with dangerous weapons,” he said.

The strike reflected a deep anger at the slow pace of South Africa’s transformation. When Joyce Lebelo moved to the informal settlement near a platinum mine in 1998, she built only a tiny shack, thinking the new government would soon provide her with a proper house. She is still waiting.

“When we voted, we didn’t think we would spend 10 years living in a shack,” she said, sitting beneath the tin roof of her tin-walled house, which she has expanded over the years to include a kitchen, bedrooms, a dining room and wall-to-wall carpeting. But bricks and mortar, not to mention running water and electricity, are still a distant dream.

“The promises they made, they have not delivered,” Ms. Lebelo said. “The people who got power are fat and rich. They have forgotten the people at the bottom.”

And Ms. Lebelo, who has a job cooking school lunches and whose husband works as a driver at a platinum mine, is one of the lucky ones: at least her family has two incomes.

Unemployment is a major problem in mining areas, said John Capel of the [Bench Marks Foundation](#), a research and advocacy organization that studies mining communities.

“There is a kind of desperation, a lack of hope and a resentment for the mining industry and the government,” Mr. Capel said. “We have been warning for years of these potential uprisings. People are angry.”

A senior member of the rival union, A.M.C.U., says that workers are angry and feel betrayed by the party that liberated South Africa.

“We made the A.N.C. what it is today, but they have no time for us,” the union leader said, asking that his name be withheld because he feared reprisals from the government. “Nothing has changed, only the people on top, and they just keep getting more money.”

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