

## **“Shack Fire Takes Life, eThekweni Municipality Electrification Policy Takes Soul”**

**by Shantel Vachani**

“Shack fires are like AIDS-old news. People are bored about hearing these things because nothing ever changes or improves. If we air this, people will just turn off their TV sets. Maybe if some more people had died it would have been possible, like 10 or 20 at least.” This is the response I received after calling a friend who works with SABC news to ask him about the possibility of covering the most recent shack fire related death in the eThekweni municipality. I explained to him that Mr. Zithulele Dhlomo, 70 years old, was burned to a crisp in his shack at the Kennedy Road informal settlement last Friday evening, 11 August, 2006 around 8:30pm as a result of a tipped candle. The three others living in the shack were spared but lost all of their personal belongings. As the stench of Mr. Dhlomo’s burning flesh permeated across the settlement the community members were reminded of the last death due to fire at Kennedy Road in October 2005, that of 1-year old Mhlengi Khumalo. The elderly and the children are generally the victims in these fires, but the whole community suffers from the loss because it is a constant reminder of the injustice occurring as a result of local municipality social policy. In the aftermath of the fire, the charred leg and lower arms of Mr. Dhlomo’s body were left behind by the police, for the children to wake up to on Saturday morning.

### **“No Electricity for Shack Dwellers”**

The South African government estimated in 2001 that there were 8 million people living in informal settlements across the country and it is likely that this number has risen since then. Anytime you have more than one sixth of your population being adversely affected by a social policy or condition it is no longer a small issue but rather a national crisis. Yet also in 2001, despite being acutely aware of the magnitude of this crisis, the eThekweni municipality made a conscious political decision to discontinue electrification in the informal settlements. The policy states that ‘In past (1990s) electrification was rolled out to all and sundry...electrification of the informal settlements has now been discontinued’.

It is clear that this policy runs contrary to the internationally acclaimed “new” South African Constitution which clearly states in sections 26(1) and (2) that: (a) ‘everyone has the right to have access to adequate housing’; that (b) ‘the state must take reasonable legislative and other measures (such as policy and programmes) to achieve the progressive realisation of this right’. The 2001 informal settlement electrification policy appears to be just the opposite of progressive realisation, but rather an oppressive regression, remnant of Apartheid times. One would have to ask what those living in informal settlements during Apartheid, supporting the ANC government throughout, have gained from years of struggle and rendered support. Where are the promises of service delivery and the progressive realisation of housing rights? How many more Mhlengi Khumalo and Zithulele Dhlomo cases must occur before justice is served?

### **“Our Children are Dying”**

Death is nothing new to the residents of Kennedy Road. “Fire is our biggest worry in the shacks where paraffin stoves are used for cooking and candles for light. But if it is not fire, it is AIDS and if it is not AIDS it is tuberculosis or diarrhea”, states Cindi Maluleka of Kennedy Road. “Our children are dying.”

When asked about the municipality's promise of housing, Lungile Mgube of Kennedy Road states, "I was born in the shacks, my children were born here and I am sure that my children's children will also be born and die here. I don't believe the government. Do you know how many years they have been promising us housing? They say 2010. Maybe 2022. Maybe never. We are still here and I am tired. They leave us no choice but to march."

Before the Kennedy Road community mobilized in a series of large marches there were just seven toilets for seven thousand people. Now there are a few more but nowhere near enough. The inhumanity of this arrangement translates into human excretions throughout the shack areas. Mgube expresses, "We have no access to sanitation. The smells from the toilets make our babies sick. Also they attract the flies which then come and land on our food spreading disease. This is where the diarrhea comes from. And the children are much more vulnerable."

Nonhlanhla Mzobe of Kennedy Road explains how those living in the shack suffer when it rains. "The shacks get flooded and you have no choice but to either stay in your shack or go outside and wait for the rains to end. And you can't even get to the taps to get drinking water because the dirt has turned into mud and it becomes impossible to walk."

When asked about the possibility of a brighter future for their children, 16-year old Sbongile Nglobo of Kennedy Road explains that children are unlikely to get jobs in things other than as domestics due to the cost and the inaccessibility of the schools. "A formal education is not a reality for most children in the jondolos. The schools charge 300 Rand a year per child which does not include daily transportation. Imagine you have three children and you have to pay 900 in tuition in addition to 18 Rand a day in transport 5 days a week. Do you know how much a domestic makes per month working 6 days a week 8 hours a day- about 300 Rand. Once you take out transport costs you are left with only half that to pay for food, medical costs, rent etc. With what money can we go to school?"

### **Call for Community Support**

All of the individuals interviewed in this article are part of a larger social movement called Abahlali baseMjondolo Movement South Africa, the organisation uniting shack dwellers across Durban. To date the movement includes more than 20,000 members from 30 informal settlements and is the largest movement in South African known to be working with and for the basic human rights of shack dwellers.

At the time of writing this article four days and four nights have passed since the fire. Municipality's disaster management service have still not arrived to offer their meager yet required support of a blanket and two tins of canned food for each person rendered homeless by fire. Abahlali BaseMjondolo has put together funds for a burial service for Mr. Dhomlo and 5 kg of mini-meal, 5 kg of sugar bean, 2kg of sugar, some fish, cooking oil and 4 cans of soup for three survivors who were lucky to have been spared their lives but have lost all of their personal belongings.

There will be a Memorial service held for Mr. Dhomlo on Thursday 17 August 2006 at 6:30pm at Kennedy Road Informal Settlement in Clare Estate. All community members, local NGO's, faith based leaders, media, human rights activists and those in solidarity with collective action against the oppressive, dehumanizing social policies affecting shack dwellers are invited to attend the service.

For more information about the memorial service, Abahlali Base Mjondolo or to make a donation to the families affected, please contact:

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Interviews taken on 15 August 2006 at Kennedy Road

Sites used:

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