

## **Gukurahundi Reconciliation Urged**

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New bill aims to address emotional scars of mass killings, but some say it doesn't go far enough. Fighting hard to hold back tears, 52-year-old Ernest Ngwenya points to three mounds of soil crudely marked with stones and burnt logs at a clearing two kilometres from his homestead.

The contorted face tells of the emotional turmoil Ngwenya is battling to control. When he eventually manages to speak, his voice is full of pain and grief.

"I have waited 24 years for this day to grieve openly with my relatives and to show them where I buried our father, brother and uncle who were killed during Gukurahundi," he said.

"All along, I was afraid that if I talked about something like this, more of my relatives would be beaten or killed - just like what happened during Gukurahundi."

The government's bloody suppression of opposition in southern Zimbabwe after independence in 1980 is known as the Gukurahundi, or "the rains that sweep away the chaff".

The North Korean-trained Fifth Brigade killed an estimated 20,000 people, ostensibly for being dissidents. Many were buried in unmarked graves or thrown down disused mines. But survivors say the killings were systematic and targeted at Zapu office bearers and community leaders such as teachers, nurses and headmen.

Zimbabwean president Robert Mugabe has not publicly apologised for the massacres except to say the atrocities were "a moment of madness".

More than two decades later, life is back to normal in Matabeleland and the Midlands. But the relative calm is deceptive.

Ngwenya was able to overcome his fear thanks to help from the local legislator and members of a social justice pressure group called Ibhetshu Likazulu. Lupane member of parliament, Jabuliso Mguni, also counselled Ngwenya and his extended family, saying that it would do them good to talk about their experiences.

Ngwenya says he needed assurances that nothing would happen to him if he spoke out.

Movement for Democratic Change legislator and lawyer David Coltart believes Zimbabwe is still in a state of denial regarding Gukurahundi. Coltart was part of a team of researchers that compiled a report, called *Breaking the Silence*, on the atrocities over ten years ago.

"I do not think that even many sympathetic democrats who oppose the Zanu-PF regime have a clear idea

of the scale of this crime against humanity - nor the extent of the psychological damage done to the affected communities," he said.

Indeed, most survivors are still seething with anger and grief. Elda Mlalazi is a mother of two and gets highly emotional when she recounts what she endured during Gukurahundi. She shows this reporter knife wounds that she says were inflicted by a neighbour on instructions from the soldiers.

"The scars are a constant reminder, especially when my in-laws, who don't know how I got them, start saying I was a prostitute before I got married. They laugh and say the scars were punishment from jilted boyfriends. There is nothing I can say to them but I know the truth," she said.

Ibhetshu Likazulu chairperson, Qhubekani Dube, says his organisation is trying - albeit on a very small scale - "to bring peace and closure among people who are still grieving and hurting inside. We realise that if people don't bring the issue out into the open, tribal enmity will continue," argued Dube.

The pressure group, formed in 2005, helps families identify where their relatives are buried and helps to organise burial rituals. During the ceremonies, villagers are encouraged to share their experiences and concerns over the massacres. Listening to some of the mainly Ndebele villagers recounting their experiences during a grave identification ceremony for Ngwenya's father, Mfungelwa, his brother, Aleck, and an uncle, Kaise Moyo, one is struck by the frequent reference to how "Shona-speaking soldiers" committed the atrocities.

Dube says the organisation fears that if such thoughts are left unaddressed, tribal hatred between Ndebeles and Shona will be perpetuated. He says that Ibhetshu Likazulu is trying to explain to survivors and families of victims that they should direct their anger at Mugabe "because it was him who issued the order to kill".

Mguni believes there is a desperate need to assuage the pain and grief of Gukurahundi. He worries that life has been at what he calls a "cultural standstill" for affected families. This, he explains, is because families have not buried their relatives according to custom and consequently they cannot communicate with their deceased as tradition demands.

"We have ways of burying our own. We have not done that. People were not given a chance to grieve. We are hurting inside. We have wounds festering within that need to be treated and healed by openly talking about how and why our relatives were killed. Keeping quiet will not do us any good," he said.

Additionally, Mguni says people's experiences of Gukurahundi must be recorded for posterity.

Another Matabeleland North legislator, Professor Jonathan Moyo, has drafted the Gukurahundi National Memorial Bill. Moyo is an independent member of parliament for Tsholotsho. His constituency was the first area where the Fifth Brigade was deployed in January 1983.

He says he will soon publish and distribute the proposed legislation for public input before tabling it in parliament.

Moyo, a former minister of information and publicity in Mugabe's cabinet, reckons the bill would garner

enough support to allow it to be enacted because its objective of "putting in place a mechanism to deal with unresolved issues, healing the open wounds and invisible scars by seeking truth and justice", is noble.

Coltart, however, says legislation alone will not suffice. He accepts the proposed bill "may be a useful vehicle to ascertain the views and needs of victims" but adds, "The bill itself will not heal wounds – the wounds of this atrocity will require a deep-rooted commitment by government and the entire nation to understand what happened, to apologise for what happened, and to take far-reaching steps to reconcile..the ongoing suffering caused."

The legislator's views resonate with those of survivors such as Ngwenya and his cousin Mlalazi. Ngwenya says now that he has dealt with the emotional side of Gukurahundi, he can start facing up to the realities of getting national identity papers for his nephews and nieces. And, one day, he hopes that the government will compensate him and his neighbours for property destroyed during the massacres.

Even then Gukurahundi will remain a part of his life. "I won't forget. I cannot forget. How do you forget something like that? But at least now I can be at peace with myself, I know where my father is buried," he said.

Fiso Dinga is the pseudonym of an IWPR journalist in Zimbabwe.

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