



Media statement by the Bench Marks Foundation

Fury at Mantashe, Police Action at Xolobeni Meeting

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

The tactics employed by police at yesterday's chaotic community meeting at Xolobeni on the Wild Coast are reminiscent of those used by the apartheid police, the Bench Marks Foundation said today.

Responding with fury to police action against the Amadiba Crisis Committee (ACC), the organisation said that Minister of Mineral Resources, Gwede Mantashe, who organised the meeting, had shut out the genuine voices of those who stand to lose most from mining and used riot police and stun grenades to intimidate any opposing voices.

Executive Director of Bench Marks, John Capel, said that as a result, the organisation had no choice but to withdraw its invitation to the minister to give the key note address at its conference in October.

He said Minister Mantashe's attendance at the conference "would be a huge embarrassment to us and impede our good name".

Capel added: "The minister arrived at Xolobeni on Sunday with 60 to 100 riot police. As a result of the intimidation of 250 ACC members, the bussing in of over 500 people from outside areas who are not directly impacted on by the mining, plus bringing in Chief Langa Baleni and claimant chief Zanzuka who have interests in the mining, and the Bizana mayor, the meeting erupted into chaos.

"The Amadiba community experienced a war-like zone, with stun grenades going off outside whilst those inside were split into three groups and then thrown out of the meeting.

"In addition, the agenda was loaded with pro mining groups with prominence given to the chief and aspirant chief and other pro mining speakers.

"The Amadiba community was hoping for an open and honest engagement, but it seems minister Mantashe, like his predecessors, is brazenly pro mining, and intent on blocking the genuine voices of communities impacted on.

“For over 15 years this community has fought against mining, preferring subsistence farming and eco-tourism. Yet it seems the country is up for sale, and the democratic right of communities to have a say in their future is being ignored.

“Not only were Amadiba of Xolobeni put on the side and back of the tent, they were also prevented from speaking when it was their time. All the speakers on the platform were pro mining,” Capel said.

Capel said that when human rights lawyer Richard Spoor tried to intervene to negotiate with the provincial police minister to restore calm, he was arrested. He was later released after the ACC had gone to Bizana to protest his arrest and told to appear in court on Tuesday.

“We at Bench Marks Foundation are utterly disappointed in Mantashe and the way he planned this meeting, shutting out the genuine voices of those most who stand to lose, using riot police and stun grenades to intimidate any opposing voices.

“For us, he is also captured and although initially we welcomed his appointment, hoping for a more rational person with integrity, this has been a rude awakening. We now know that the poor and vulnerable will continue to have their land seized in the name of development and continue to suffer and lose their ancestral land.

“In this light, the board of the Foundation decided that he is not welcome to attend our annual conference. Nevertheless, we will continue to engage his office to seek to meet with him and give him all our Policy Gap studies so in future he can make more informed approaches and decisions that benefit the country and not just a small group of BEE people and Australians, as is currently the case with the Minerals Resources Company,” he concluded.

ENDS

Bench Marks Foundation is an independent non- governmental organisation, mandated by churches to monitor the practices of multi-national corporations to

- ensure they respect human rights;
- protect the environment;
- ensure that profit-making is not done at the expense of other interest groups;
- and
- ensure that those most negatively impacted upon are heard, protected and accommodated within the business plans of the corporations.

The Foundation was launched in 2001 by the Rt Rev Dr Jo Seoka who chairs the organisation and by member churches of the SACC.

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