

OUR BURNING PLANET

Durban floods - An open letter to President Cyril Ramaphosa

By Desmond D'Sa

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The massive floods that hit KZN, and Durban in particular, in April 2019 are yet another indicator of how climate change is affecting our resilience, a fact acknowledged by President Cyril Ramaphosa. But there has been a strange silence since then, and big, carbon-intensive programmes are steaming ahead in the port city. Surely the time for talking is over?

President Ramaphosa, on 24 April 2019, you visited South Durban neighbourhoods. You had returned home to South Africa early from an important African Union conference because a catastrophic storm hit us on Easter Monday. The “rain bomb” that pounded South Durban included 168mm of downpour in 24 hours, by far the worst flooding ever recorded in the city.



Ten people were trapped inside a house at Westcliff Secondary School on Crimby Avenue, Chatsworth, after heavy rainfall on 22 April 2019 caused the embankment to collapse. Photo: Aisha Abdool Karim.

Upon visiting our communities, you immediately gave us [sound analysis](#): “This is partly what climate change is about, it just hits when we least expect it.”

We agree that the climate crisis must be talked about. And we hope *you* agree that the forces that caused this crisis – the major greenhouse gas emitters in the fossil fuel industries, transport (air, shipping and automotive), corporate agriculture, carbon-intensive production and consumption systems, and methane-emitting disposal at landfills, and their financiers – must be named and shamed.

As you probably know, South Africa's own highest-polluting corporations – Eskom, Sasol and the largest “minerals-energy complex” firms – place our country at the world's very highest levels of greenhouse-gas emissions, measured in terms of per-person per-unit-of-GDP. Our economy is carbon-addicted, and that must urgently change.

We would like to start in South Durban, where we suffer from Africa's largest oil refining complex – combining the Engen and the BP and Shell (Sapref) facilities in Wentworth and Merebank, plus a massive new trucking complex at the old Clairwood Racecourse site – and where we have advocated a downsizing and phase-out, for our own safety and health, as well as for the sake of the environment, both local and global.



Siyabonga Zulu, a maskandi musician who stayed in the Clare Estate, Reservoir Hills informal settlement in Durban, died along with his family after a mudslide destroyed their home on 22 April 2019 (Photo: Aisha Abdool Karim)

We expect these drivers of climate change to continue taking our society over the cliff, because offshore Durban today four massive corporations – ExxonMobil, Statoil, ENI and Sasol – are exploring for oil and gas in the dangerous Agulhas Current, more than 3km deep, hoping to achieve a find as big as Total did offshore of Mossel Bay in February. These insane digs for fossil fuel must urgently be halted.

Moreover, in the spirit of the “polluter pays” principle, the damage the major polluters have done must be tallied up, and a bill given them for these liabilities.

In Durban and the surrounding areas of KZN a month ago, we lost more than 70 living souls (all low-income black South Africans). They died due to raging floodwaters and collapsed houses. We also suffered massive environmental destruction, unprecedented plastic pollution of our harbour and

ocean, and physical infrastructure damage that probably exceeds R1-billion (with Durban alone [suffering](#) more than R650-million).

Provincial MEC Nomusa Dube-Ncube [observed](#), “flooded and blocked roads, collapsed buildings and perimeter walls, blocked storm-water drains and sewer lines, flooded buildings and households and power outages as a result of electric cable damage”.

Mr President, we also agree with you that we did not “expect it”: the people of South Durban and our municipality were *unprepared*, and that is the purpose of this letter.

We ask you to now advance climate consciousness, reduce our dependence on greenhouse gas-emitting economic activities, and ensure there is funding not only for what the United Nations calls our “loss & damage” a month ago, but also the costs of adaptation for our ill-prepared South Durban neighbourhoods.

We have many unemployed construction and general workers in our communities who are very anxious to get started on adaptation projects to fix and strengthen our drainage systems, build sturdier houses, construct safer bridges, restore wetlands, rehabilitate the sponge capacity of our riverine systems and detox our land, especially so that the poisons of plastic pollution are removed.

Indeed, you gave us [reassuring words](#) about loss & damage payments: “I immediately contacted our Treasury and said do we have money to assist our people? And they said ‘President, we have the money’. So money will be mobilised to assist our people. These are emergency situations that we budget for, so resources will be mobilised in the biggest way so that our people who are currently in need are assisted. It will take time.”

One month later, the time has come to assess what has happened, because we desperately need both climate relief for the loss & damage, and a major new infrastructural investment in job-creating climate change adaptation support, so that our area, and our nation, region and continent, can become more resilient.

To be frank, Treasury is missing in action. We cannot help but remark that normally, a strong supporter of Minister Tito Mboweni, *Business Day*, this week [noticed](#) how little he seems to care about those who suffer in South Africa:

“During the weekend after the general election, he tweeted 14 times about preparing a chicken casserole, complete with pictures of his chickens. ‘Life is too hard, sometimes we just have to relax a bit. Cooking ...,’ he tweeted, followed by a picture of himself in Parliament laughing uproariously. But two days later, when SA’s unemployment rate hit 27.6% after the loss of more than 100,000 jobs in the first quarter, the minister was silent.”

Treasury has been silent when it comes to helping South Durban recover from this extreme storm, and prepare for the next. Their excuse may well be that they deal directly with eThekwin municipal leadership, but that raises our next concern: widespread corruption.

Our expectations of these leaders have been dashed, because of a similar event in October 2017, when an [extreme storm](#) hit Durban, including the port and South Durban. The damage was estimated at R576-million. Yet the massive investments needed to improve our resilience were not made. As one example, the Glebelands Hostel roof was badly damaged – but only in early 2019 did repairs begin!

President Ramaphosa, the main government official you toured Durban with was our Mayor, Zandile Gumede. Last Tuesday, she was arrested for (*alleged – Ed*) corruption associated with a waste-

recycling tender. In May 2018 the (*alleged – Ed*) corruption in supply of sanitation systems had become evident, as [CityPress named Gume](#) “the mayor of graft”, and Auditor General Kimi Makwetu withdrew from the city because of death threats. In September, a new corruption [revelation](#) concerned her involvement in waste recycling, with bogus tenders costing at least R90-million.

But even though the evidence has become insurmountable, the Hawks have been playing politics. Last December, [according to CityPress](#),

A senior Hawks official directly involved with the investigation said “the docket has been opened and I have seen it. The investigation has been completed and we are tying a few loose ends before they get arrested. Following the investigation, the team has compiled a report. The report is accompanied by piles and piles of annexures which are contained in many boxes”. Another police officer, a high-ranking Crime Intelligence operative who knows about the case, said: “The investigation has been completed. Arrests are imminent. I think they are now trying to figure out how to go about the logistics. Remember, this is a very sensitive case involving quite serious crimes.”

Mr President, Zandile Gume’s arrest occurred a week after the election, one in which the African National Congress lost massive voting shares in KwaZulu-Natal. In Durban, your party would have lost more votes if the Hawks had done their job more rapidly.

As the likes of Mabuza, Gigaba, Mbete, Mokonyane and others with dubious track records are shunted out of power, it is long overdue for Zandile Gume and 62 councillors (*alleged – Ed*) to be implicated in what is now [reported by the Mail&Guardian](#) to be R208-million waste-management tender corruption to be shown the door.

In contrast, our workers who are lucky to get jobs doing the badly needed work are only able to get R120 a day, and often piece work is paid as low as R11/hour, for example in the Extended Public Works Programme. This mix of state and business corruption plus extreme low wages for ordinary workers, explains why we have the world’s most unequal society.

Finally, we have one extremely corrupt landowner that deserves your immediate attention: Transnet. Because its fraud is now being exposed in the Zondo Commission, we anticipate punishments against this firm’s leaders, suppliers and financiers to be swift and decisive.

One request is that further unnecessary port expansion be halted. The current project of expansion, financed by the BRICS New Development Bank’s \$200-million loan, featuring Shauwn Mpisane joining a consortium late last year, was called into question by a whistle-blower. We need to rethink the entire South Durban expansion Transnet has in mind, in view of the crisis in global trade and shipping.

Another example of Transnet’s corruption is at the old airport just across the highway from Glebelands Hostel. It was supposed to be used for a “Dig Out Port” costing more than R100-billion – digging was meant to have started in 2016 – but it was postponed until 2032. Then Transnet apparently recently signed a contract with a new company to restart the airport with a potential 20-year lease, but the deal fell apart. This is another space we insist that construction work begin, for environmental rehabilitation, for a new residential settlement vitally needed due to overcrowding in our communities, and for establishing factories to produce solar and other renewable energy systems.

The challenge you have is not only the anti-corruption drive, as is often stated – but it is to re-acknowledge and take action on the two points you made one month ago: *climate change is with us*,

and funds are needed for victims. We ask you to endorse the [Million Climate Jobs](#) programme that many civil society groups in South Africa have put forward.²

We ask you to come back to South Durban this month, and return repeatedly, to show ordinary people here that you are serious, not a politician who arrives at the scene of suffering for cheap publicity, but who does nothing thereafter to help us, and makes our problems worse by maintaining our economy's addictions to fossil fuels. **DM**

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https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2019-05-24-durban-floods-an-open-letter-to-president-cyril-ramaphosa/?utm_source=Ince_FirstThing