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| South Africa: Call for Solidarity amid Crisis  |
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**Coronavirus: A Call for Solidarity in a Time of Crisis**

Abahlali baseMjondolo has held small meetings with elected leaders in all the provinces where we have members to discuss the coronavirus crisis. The best available scientific information has been shared with our members. We have decided to suspend our entire programme of meetings and protests until the crisis has passed. This includes our annual UnFreedom Day rally held each year in April, which usually attracts more than 5 000 people.

We have declared a red alert in all land occupations and settlements affiliated to the movement. The resources that would have been used for meetings, protests and rallies have all been redirected towards providing equipment that can help people to survive this crisis. We are all doing all that we can to communicate the best information, based on science, to our members and to combat fake news and conspiracy theories.

We will do all that we can to keep our members, and other impoverished people safe. However, we face some serious challenges which result from the longstanding social crisis. Shack dwellers, and other poor people, including street traders, casual workers and undocumented migrants, have not been taken into consideration when it comes to the prevention of the corona virus, or included in decision making about the crisis.

Already people who live in shack settlements are faced with many other diseases such as cholera, tuberculosis, HIV, and various stress related conditions. This is as a direct result of the failure of the government to provide housing and basic services to our communities, the failures and decline of the health care system, as well as the economic crisis that has resulted in mass unemployment. There is real fear that this new virus will hit impoverished people the hardest. In the Spanish Flu epidemic of 1918 and 1919 sixty percent of the people who died were poor people living in western India. There is a fear that, once again, it could be the poor of the world, more than a billion of whom live in shack settlements, who are hit hardest by this epidemic. This is a national and international emergency.

Disasters, like fires and floods, always affect impoverished people the most. For this reason, we have been saying, during 15 years of struggle, that disasters are political. Disease is also political. Class determines who has medical aid and who does not, who has access to water, sanitation and safe means for heating and lighting and who does not. We have reminded all our members that access to life saving medication for people living with HIV was won through struggle and the politicisation of an important health issue. It is now vital that we politicise the crisis caused by the coronavirus and that impoverished and working-class people take their place in this process.

The leadership of Abahlali has visited settlements where we have membership as a way of spreading the word about the virus. Many people have complained about a lack of understanding about the virus.

On 15 March the President made a call to all south Africans to take precautionary measures to prevent the spread of the virus. However, many of the measures that are being recommended assume that everyone lives in a house, a house that is at no risk of being destroyed by the state, a house which has water and sanitation. But the reality is that millions of us continue to live in shacks of indignity. It does not seem possible to prevent this virus from spreading when we still live in the mud like pigs, when in many settlements there is no water, or hundreds of people sharing one tap, and many settlements lack any access to sanitation.

Our members have stressed that many people do not have regular or easy access to water and proper sanitation and are still using bushes to relieve themselves. Municipalities across the country do not collect refuse from shack settlements. In Mbizana communities share water with cattle which results in many diseases.

Our members have also expressed concern that the high employment rate and the extreme poverty in shack settlements makes it difficult for us to stay in our homes. If we do stay at home we may die as a result of starvation before the virus gets us.

Our members have also noted that it is also difficult to isolate ourselves from each other as we live under extremely congested conditions.

Another concern that has been expressed is that we continue to have our shacks (illegally and violently) demolished by the state during this time of crisis. Today in Ekuphumeleleni one of our members has been hospitalised due to state violence during an eviction. People are being left homeless and their belongings burnt to ashes at the hand of arrogant councillors like S’busiso Kwela of Ward 17 whose taxi business benefits from tenders from the eThekweni Municipality.

On Wednesday we wrote to the MEC for Health in KwaZulu-Natal requesting an urgent meeting to discuss how we can work together to develop a strategy to keep residents of shack settlements safe in this time of crisis. We have not received a reply, or even an acknowledgement of our email.

We as shack dwellers also love our country and its people and we want to help the government in the fight against this pandemic. This is a national disaster that needs a united force to work together for the health and safety of everyone. This is no time for political differences or fighting factional battles. We are calling for all South African, black and white, rich or poor, documented or undocumented, organised and unorganised, to be united in the fight against this pandemic before we perish. People must be put before profit. However, this can only be done when the poor and the working class are also considered and included when decisions are made and strategies for the way forward developed.

After numerous discussions, in all provinces where we have members, we would like to issue an invitation and a set of demands.

We would like to express our appreciation for and solidarity with all nurses, doctors and other health professionals working against this virus, including people working as cleaners and in other jobs in hospitals, and to call for a massive increase in financial support for the health care system. In our office in Durban we have pictures of Che Guevara and Frantz Fanon. They were both radical doctors who took the side of the oppressed. Steve Biko was a medical student before he was banned and then murdered. We would like to invite all progressive doctors, and other medical experts, to work with us, as comrades, as we oppose this pandemic.

We also issue the following set of fifteen demands:

1. All evictions must be stopped with immediate effect.
2. All disconnections from self-organised access to water, electricity and sanitation must be stopped with immediate effect.
3. All shack settlements must be included in municipal refuse removal programmes with immediate effect.
4. All workers, including domestic workers, who are not required to be on the frontlines of working against the pandemic must be given paid leave until the crisis has passed. Workers who are on the frontline of working against the pandemic must be given all possible forms of protection and care.
5. A guaranteed income must be made available to all people who are not able to earn an income during this period of crisis.
6. Steps must be taken to ensure that everyone has access to sufficient healthy food including the provision of free food parcels. Subsidies and price caps must be put in place on all basic food items. The measures that have been put in place against hoarding and profiteering must be strictly enforced.
7. Water and sanitation must be provided to all shack settlements as an urgent priority.
8. Sanitiser and all other medically required equipment must be made available to all at no cost.
9. All residents of shack settlements who test positive for the virus must be given safe and dignified accommodation in which they can self-isolate. Where necessary appropriate buildings can be requisitioned for this purpose.
10. Scientifically based information about the virus, and how to protect people from it, must be shared in all languages, in a way that is accessible and understandable to all, and is based on the understanding that millions of people live in shacks, that others are detained in prisons and migrant detention centres, and that millions of people will starve if they cannot continue to earn an income.
11. Payment must be suspended on all loans.
12. Free data must be made available to all by the cell phone companies so that people can stay in touch with family, friends, neighbours, hospitals and comrades.
13. All people detained by the state for non-criminal acts, such as being undocumented, occupying land, participating in arranging self-organised connections to water, electricity and sanitation, and so on, must be released with immediate effect.
14. All hospitals and all other health facilities must be available to all people living in South Africa, including undocumented migrants, with immediate effect.
15. There must be free testing and treatment for all.

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