

# Running diary of BM Section Fire response: Community empowerment in crisis

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By Andy Bolnick (on behalf of iKhayalami and CORC)



File photo. Image by: MIKE HUTCHINGS / REUTERS taken from  
<http://africajournalismtheworld.com/tag/khayelitsha-fire/>

On the **1st January 2013, Tuesday** in the early hours of the morning a man in the furthest eastern part of BM Section informal settlement in Khayelitsha fell asleep while he was cooking food on a hotplate stove. A fire started at 4am. With gale-force winds blowing the fire quickly swept out of control. With the strong southeaster and being hampered by lack of access the middle of the settlement the fire department failed to contain the blaze, finally ‘putting out’ the fire at 10.30am when it had virtually run its course - blazing a trail of destruction right through the settlement leaving approximately 5000 people homeless, 1 000 shacks gutted, 3 confirmed deaths and one person in a critical condition. On January the 2nd of January a fourth body was found in the debris and on the 4th of January the man who had 80% burns passed away in hospital.



AFP Photo / Rodger Bosch – RT.com

**On the 2nd of January, Wednesday** Phumezo Sibanda, an ISN leader from Khayelitsha, called Andy Bolnick from Ikhayalami to talk to her about the disaster and start thinking through what kind of support could be offered. It was agreed that Phumezo would go to site to assess things and meet with the BM leaders.

Shortly after Phumezo's call one of Ikhayalami's main funder for disaster relief/re-blocking efforts (for the past 6 years), Mr. Gerald Fox from the Percy Fox Foundation, called. He had heard about the devastating fire and offered immediate resources so that Ikhayalmi could respond with a sizeable number of shelters in order to potentially attract more resources to a response effort and to do a re- blocking.

In the meantime Phumezo who rallied support from two other ISN leaders in the Khayeltisha area - Thozama and Nombini Mafikhana - attended the tail end of a Disaster Management meeting at the OR Tambo hall, which has since become the nerve center of relief efforts. Following the meeting they engaged with some of the BM leadership.

Phumezo then asked Bolnick to come to site to meet with some of the leadership who informed us that they 'want the city to level the area and open up roads'. They said that this is what they discussed in the meeting with the city that morning.



Bolnick enquired about whether the leadership had a list of all the residents of BM. The leadership said that there is a list that the city has. Bolnick suggested that they get hold of this list, verify it and if need be start compiling their own list. Phumezo and Bolnick also spoke about the potential of spatial reconfiguration in addition to merely demarcating roads. Mention was made to the potential of the availability of between 150 - 200 shelters from Ikhayalami (20 immediately and the remainder after the 15th) to assist with a spatial reconfiguration/re-blocking if the community decided to go this route. There was also some discussion about the potential of arranging an exchange visit to Sheffield Rd. and Mthisni Wam for BM leaders.



While on site the leaders were informed that a fourth body had been found in the debris. We left the leaders to attend to the pressing issues at hand.



The site is so vast - standing in the middle of the site - on the one side people were still collecting rubble and clearing the site, on the other side the site was almost cleared.

**3rd of January, Thursday** community leaders and NGO support staff attended a joint meeting of stakeholders. Those present were members of a crisis committee that was formed the day before comprising of a few leaders from BM section, delegates from the city (Disaster Management Dept.), Social Dev. Services, SASSA, Home Affairs, Law Enforcement, KDF, SANCO, VPUU, Amaxesibe Traditional Council, an ANC delegation, a church group and other people from the community and our delegation. Important points were raised but no one was listening to each other. As soon as an important point was made another person would talk about something inconsequential or petty and the vital point would be lost. There was also information that a separate disaster response committee comprising of provincial government members was meeting separately in Belville. This created further frustration. Party political issues were being raised that included laying blame and arguing. The BM leadership were getting angry and wanted action.

Issues that were raised pertained to insufficient food, the need for more mattresses, frustration that the city had not started leveling. The city called for all the debris to be removed by the community, talk also revolved around how to take care of people's debris who were still in the Eastern Cape on holiday - where could it be stored and how the city would take care of the debris so that when construction began people could get their burnt material back to use for reconstruction. It was

agreed that all the debris would be removed from site by 2pm the following day. There was also an urgent plea to get the 'list' verified. This task was given to the Principle Field Officer (PFO) and VPUU.

Bolnick suggested that it would be imperative that the BM leadership be involved in this process. On behalf of the SDI alliance delegation attending the meeting she offered support to the city and VPUU to work with the leadership on getting the list of victims sorted. This being a key SDI tool it was felt that it could act as an entry point for ISN to start mobilizing the community and give them the power with regards to information (the list) and start building a working relationship with VPUU.

Bolnick also mentioned that should the BM leadership and the people of BM (as well as the city) agree to do a blocking out Ikhayalami had raised funds for the provision of 200 shelters and would support this process together with our alliance partners.

With regard to the ISN supporting the City, VPUU and the leadership in compiling a verified list the first time Bolnick mentioned this, the point was lost. The second time she managed to get the offer accepted by City's the Principle Field Officer.



After the meeting the ISN members as well as NGO support staff met with four of the BM leadership to discuss a way forward. It was agreed that at 4pm that afternoon an exchange would go from BM section to Sheffield Rd and Mshini Wam. Vuyani and Nkokeli felt that ISN should not

be involved with supporting the leaders, VPUU and the city in sorting out the list of victims. Their rationale was that the leadership knows their own communities. Corc staff felt that they could not support the BM leadership if ISN had decided not to assist with the compilation of a verified list. At 2pm we all left the OR Tambo Hall.

Vuyani and Nkokeli went to Du Noon to offer support and assess the situation following a fire that occurred there on the 31st of December where 125 shacks had burnt down. A meeting was arranged for the following morning at the Corc offices for ISN and staff to regroup especially if we needed to make a decision concerning supporting Du Noon and or BM section.

At 4pm Melvyn from Ikhayalami and arrived at the OR Tambo Hall to fetch members of the BM community who had been elected to visit Sheffield Rd and Mshini Wam. The exchange was positive. The leaders from BM who attended the exchange were able to get a better grasp of what was meant by blocking-out.

**4th of January, Friday** - the regroup meeting scheduled for 8.30am was called off. Nkokeli reported that people in Du Noon had already rebuilt their shacks and that 'we should focus our attention on BM'. It was agreed to meet at OR Tambo Hall to attend the crisis committee meeting. The Mayor of Cape Town, Patricia De Lille, Councilor Sonnenberg, E.D Mr. Seth Maqetuka and Head of Informal Settlements Department Mr. Zwandile Sokupa as well as other officials from the various departments' attended this meeting.

The Mayor would hear non-of-this and became angry that people were meddling in politics while there was a crisis at hand. She also confirmed all the support that the city had provided up to that stage. Fortuitously Naledi Pandor the Minister of Home Affairs walked into the meeting. She too said that it was not a time for politics and that the focus should be on aiding the people and moving forward. Minister Pandor made a number of practical recommendations with regard to processing ID's and the immediate provision of portable toilets.

A site-specific report was given. Mr. Maqetuka reported that 'the City is working on a short-term plan and is also developing a short to medium term plan'. The Mayor asked that the meeting focus on the immediate disaster response. The city engineer reported that 'there was an agreement for Solid Waste to clear the material and that they were on

site and machinery will come on site this afternoon to do leveling’.

Councilor Sonnenberg stressed the importance of a verified beneficiary list. Mr. Sokupa and Mr. Maqetuka acknowledged Ikhayalmi’s offer to support the process with the provision of 200 shelters should there be a need for a re-blocking.

The Mayor agreed to be part of the crisis committee and said that all her engagements will be done through the Ward Councilor in line with protocol.

After the meeting Mr. Maqetuka and Mr. Soup met with the SA SDI Alliance delegates briefly. Bolnick requested access to the site layout for fire-breaks/roads. They informed us that the City was not yet sure in which direction the relief effort would go as they were in consultation with the Province and there was a likelihood that they would embark on a UISP project, so as of yet there were no concrete plans. They asked us to be a patient and said they would draw us in when needed. Thereafter most of the officials and political leaders went on a site visit. The alliance delegates stayed in the vicinity of the hall and managed to meet a city engineer who said that there was layout for the roads but that he did not have it with him.



**On 5th of January, Saturday** Phumezo, Thozama, Nombini and Bolnick went to the OR Tambo Hall to meet with the engineer and attend the crisis committee meeting. Disaster Management chaired the crisis committee meeting. The Mayor and officials who had been in the meeting the previous day were not present. Disaster management reported on progress with regards to the delivery of more mattresses, medi-packs and nappies. The responsibility of distribution had been given to the BM leadership. The confirmed number of people registered and

staying in the OR Tambo hall was 1660 made up of almost an equal number of males, females and children and 55 babies. The confirmed list of fatalities were given - 3 deaths reported on the 1st, one found on the 2nd of January in the rubble and the fifth person who passed away in hospital from 80% burns on the 4th of January.

It was also confirmed that disaster management and social services would remain on site until further notice. Discussion arose around WB Section where there had also been a fire on either the 31st Dec affecting 54 households. People complained that WB Section was not getting the same kind of support that BM was getting. It was reported that people in WB had already received the city's starter packs and that most people had rebuilt their homes. The crisis committee agreed to find ways of supporting victims in WB section.

With regard to work on the site it was reported that two front loaders and one digger loader were on site clearing and leveling the land and that a land surveyor was on site assessing where the firebreaks should go. Another plea, this time from SASSA was made for the urgent need for a verified beneficiary list. The meeting was then adjourned.

Phumezo, Nombini and Bolnick decided to go to site with two BM leaders. En route they checked the measurement of an existing road to get a sense of scale in anticipation of finding out the width that the city was planning to use.



The main reason why they decided to go to site (apart from viewing the leveling) was to find a land surveyor, engineer or even a truck driver, in fact anyone who could give them some information about the proposed fire breaks as these would be key starting points in thinking through a new layout and at the very least to consider if the proposed roads make sense to the community.

While on site they found a city official who was able to disclose the type of information they had been seeking. Firstly he told them that the width of the roads would be 5m. Secondly the City is planning on putting in two roads through the settlement and one ring road around the area that was burnt (there was previously a road at the bottom of the settlement) and thirdly the city was going to arrange for a plane to fly overhead and take high-resolution aerial photographs. From these photographs the proposed roads would be confirmed. As things progress it is clear that these images will be vital for planning purposes and are images that the alliance should try to access as soon as possible.

After this engagement the group walked to the middle of the site to assess things and think things through from a spatial perspective.



Looking at the site it did not make sense to put a ring road around the burnt area (the sides and bottom were virtually from one section of the settlement to the other so this could make sense but the top section still has shacks that did not burn and is about 17m to the main road). The width of the burnt out area looked around 35m wide with a length of approximately 100m. The top part of the ring road was the road that did not make sense as in essence if they are to go ahead with this it would mean that 500sqm would be taken up (over and above the other justifiable roads) for purpose of a road as opposed to land for those affected. It would make more sense to extend the two roads in the

middle of the settlement to meet Landsdowne Rd. From the edge of where shacks still remained to Landsdowne Rd. it is approximately 17m. This would mean that 17m x 5m x 2 roads = 170sqm would be used for roads as opposed to 500sqm. It is reasons like these that it is important that community leaders get drawn into the design processes so that they can make recommendations that make sense and work better for the broader community.

**On the 6th of January, Sunday** at 9.30am Mr. Sokupa phoned Bolnick to confirm the number of shelters that Ikhayalami could provide, how soon and how many per day. Bolnick confirmed that should a plan be reached and all parties including the BM leadership and ISN agree then Ikhayalami could make 20 shelters available immediately and from the 17th of January when factories re-opened could supply 20 per day.

Thozama, Nombini and Phumezo went to the OR Tambo Hall to attend the crisis committee meeting where the Mayor was scheduled to attend. The Mayor and the Premier arrived at the confirmed time, that being 2pm. They insisted that the crisis committee and other people in the boardroom vacate so that they could hold a meeting with the Ward Councilor. People who were in the boardroom (where meetings had been held every day since the disaster) were outraged. After some commotion two separate meetings took place -one with the Premier, Mayor and Ward Councilor and one with the crisis committee. The Ward Councilor came to the crisis committee meeting and said that he would represent the crisis committee in the meeting with the Mayor and Premier. At times he came out of the meeting to consult with members of the crisis committee.

The Premier and Mayor stated that only 250 families will return to the site, the rest will be relocated to the area next to the OR Tambo hall and others next to Busasa on SANDF land. The BM leadership informed the Ward Councilor that the Premier should not put a set number to how many households will return to the site 'as the community intends to work on their own layout that would accommodate many more than the 250 households.

**On Monday the 7th of January** it was time for the SA SDI alliance to regroup. A meeting was convened to reflect and strategize going forward. Vuyani, Nkokeli, Bunita, Olwetu, Zipho and Andy formed part of this meeting. A report on the past 5 days was given comprising the above.

In the reflection meeting it was agreed that the situation in BM is a complex and that the community is 'about to go to a big war without any tools' (Vuyani). As such it is imperative that the ISN work with the BM leaders with whom there is now a connection and go deeper so as to reach the street committee leadership and the community at large. The idea is that three Khayelitsha ISN leaders who have been involved in meetings on site since the 2nd of January will work with Vuyani and Nkokeli to develop a strategy on how to deepen ISN's presence within the broader community. It is also vital that FEDUP get drawn in into this process so that woman can start supporting one another in this difficult time.

It also became clear that Vuyani and Nkokeli's reluctance to get involved had to do with fact that they are not from the Khayelitsha are, that they view the situation in BM as highly political and that previously in 2010 as leaders of the ISN they did not succeed (through no fault of theirs) in doing what the BM leadership had asked of them and were worried this would come back to haunt them. It was agreed that in spite of all the difficulties and complexities it is vital that the ISN support the BM community in their time of need.

**On Tuesday the 8th of January** Phumezo, Nkokeli, Thozama, Vuyani and Nombini met at the OR Tambo hall. They agreed that they should call a meeting with the BM leadership that includes the street committees. Unfortunately this meeting did not materialize and ISN are planning to do it as soon as possible. That evening a leader from BM called Phumezo and Bolnick saying that the crisis committee (of which Ikhayalami had previously been invited to participate by the broader committee) would be meeting with the Mayor on the 9th of January.

**Wednesday morning the 9th of January at 9am** Ikhayalami's support at the meeting at the Civic Centre was confirmed by the BM leadership.

In the coming days things will unfold and we will constantly assess what type of support we can offer. Politics is firing and misfiring everywhere from petty politics to political mudslinging to high level politics. The petty politics and mudslinging politics are bedfellows. Every community forum/organization in Khayelitsha has been jostling to be 'powerful'. Disaster Management and other government relief effort departments are trying to complete their tasks and get the hell out of there. The high level politics are invisible to most, taking place behind closed doors and off site.

In an attempt to offer support and respond to the disaster Ikhayalami's involvement has been to 1) to support the BM leaders/community to see through and make sense of the murky waters so as to be in a better position to plot an equitable as possible way forward, to assist them in starting to think one step ahead and to open doors for the ISN and FEDUP.

The alliances role going forward should include the following agenda - to support the BM leadership to negotiate with the state, to act as a bridge between community and the state, to support our city partners in this huge task in a way gives voice to the BM community, to gain access to the plans and aerial images and draw the community into the planning and t set up women savings groups.