

# “IF YOU SPEAK UP YOU DIE”

It is not for the faint-hearted. It is a big step many people face when they see a policeman taking a bribe, an accountant embezzling funds or a government worker stealing taxpayers' money. Whistleblowing – the choice is yours and it could be fatal; so says this cautionary tale of small town sorrow.

BY ANCILLAR MANGENA

A family man, who stood up for what he believed in, paid with his life. In the coalmining town of Dundee, situated in a valley of the Biggarsberg mountains, in South Africa's KwaZulu-Natal (KZN) province, it is one of the many sad, yet largely unsung, stories of whistleblowing in Africa.

Blowing the whistle is a tough game in 21st-century Africa, but, it's as important as ever in a world of more and more dirty secrets. In many parts of the world, whistleblowers have become household names, such as Chelsea Manning, after disclosing sensitive military and diplomatic documents, and Edward Snowden after he leaked classified information from the National Security Agency. In Africa, online warrior Baba Jukwa, who leaked sensitive information about Zimbabwe's ruling party Zanu-PF; and Kenya's John Githongo, who embarrassed the powerful with his book *It's Our Turn To Eat*, are far from lauded.

Sadly, many whistleblowers in Africa are ruined or die unsung. They are shunned, harassed, jailed and left jobless.

In the small town of Umzinyathi District in KZN, South Africa, whistleblowing ended with a bullet. Grishen Bujram, from Dundee, was respected and hardworking. He had been an activist since he was 15 and a councillor. One day, he found that free houses for the poor were being sold for profit. South Africa has built millions of the so-called Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) houses, putting a roof over millions of heads.

Bujram was outraged and alleged the mayor of the African National Congress (ANC)-controlled Endumeni municipality, Thandeka Nukani, had sold 17 RDP houses and also taken one for herself; even though she had a well-paid job.

Bujram confronted the mayor and reported it to the council. On June 15, 2007, he was allegedly called for a meeting. His widow, Shirley Bujram, kissed him goodbye at the door at 6:30PM, unaware it was the last time she would see him alive.

“I was home with my children and I heard someone pounding at the door. When I went to the kitchen it was dark but I could see the police blue lights. I assumed my husband went and



“MY HUSBAND WAS DIABETIC BUT A MONTH BEFORE HE DIED HE SAID TO ME HE WAS NOT GOING TO BE KILLED BY DIABETES BECAUSE THERE IS A BULLET THERE FOR HIM; AND BY THE BULLET HE DIED”

smashed someone or something else had happened. When I opened the door I saw the police and his nephew there. I said to the nephew, ‘if your uncle is in trouble I will leave him in jail till the end of the weekend,’” says Shirley.

The men in blue asked Shirley to sit down as they delivered the news. They said Bujram had been shot many times at the wheel in a township near Dundee.

“He was like a father to all of us in the community,” says resident Muzikayifani Khumalo – eight years later.

Another resident Thando Dube\* says, “The thing that ended his life was his hatred for corruption. People like Bujram are the people who die for telling the truth. In this district, we are scared to talk because we are face to face with the gun. This place is corrupt but if you speak up you die.”

In the days after the death, Nukani, according to Shirley, visited the family to pass her condolences.

“Her exact words were ‘your husband’s killers must rot in jail’ which is shocking because she had previously sent me messages saying my husband is interfering with her work and has a jealous syndrome. If he continues on his path against her, he will be sorry,” she says.

According to the widow, a woman who was with Bujram, minutes before the assassination, testified in court that Bujram knew he was being followed by the mayor’s car, but thought nothing of it. Two brothers, on their way home from work; witnessed the mayor’s boyfriend, Bongani Shangase, shoot Bujram and her nephew, Siyabonga Nukani, used the car as a getaway vehicle.

This breakthrough gave way to disappointment for the Bujram family.

They say Dundee police had the case for three months but no arrest was made until the widow went to the organized crime unit.

Police arrested Nukani, but charges were dropped for insufficient evidence. Detectives arrested Shangase and Siyabonga Nukani. Shangase received a life sentence; Siyabonga turned state witness and got 20 years.

“Thandeka planned to have her nephew poisoned because he had turned state witness. Her boyfriend worked with other inmates to make this happen but the inmates couldn’t go through with it,” says Shirley.

There were charges for the attempted murder of Siyabonga Nukani, against Thandeka Nukani. They were withdrawn, in 2011, due to insufficient evidence.

Shirley Bujram and the police, with Siyabonga Nukani’s cooperation, also found there was a hitman, Mzamo Majola.

“I found out that when [Bujram] was killed it was the third attempt which became successful. The hitman had tried two times before. On the day Bujram was killed, Mzamo Majola couldn’t go ahead with it because there were people around. Shangase got agitated and killed my husband himself,” she says.

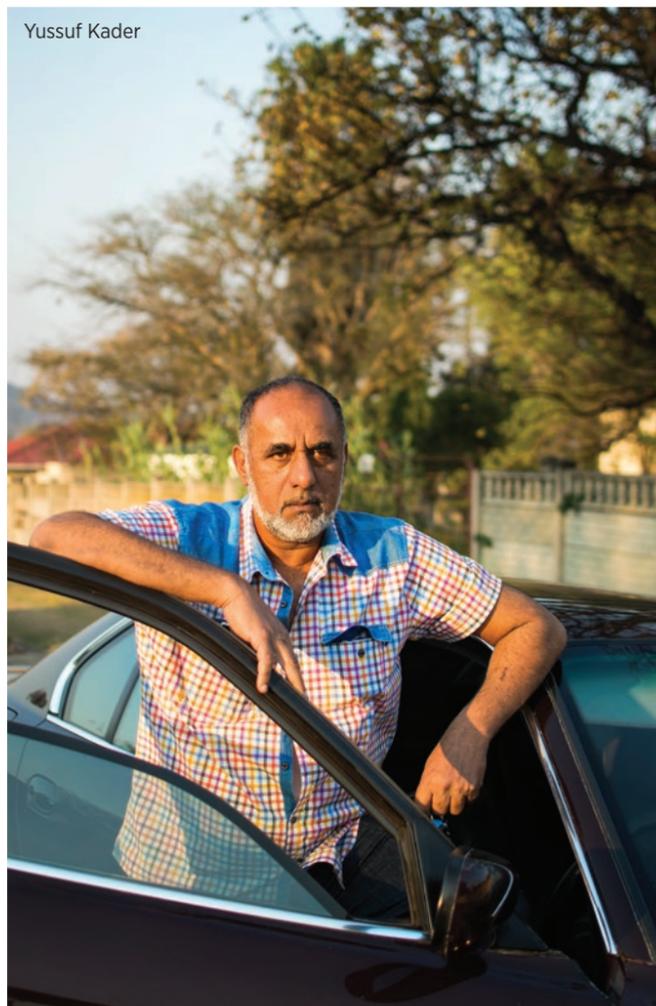
The police offered Majola a deal to turn state witness. Based on his evidence, police arrested Thandeka Nukani again.

In August last year, Judge Isaac Nkosi withdrew the Bujram murder charges against Thandeka Nukani after Majola went on the run.

For the second time, the former mayor walked free.



Mzwakhe Sithebe



Yussuf Kader

Thandeka Nukani has been redeployed as the personal assistant to Umzinyathi District mayor, James Mthethwa. She lost her mayoral seat after it was found R100,000 (\$7,410) in legal fees, for the Bujram case, were allegedly paid for by the ANC.

Thandeka Nukani did not respond to repeated requests for comment.

Nearly eight years on, Bujram’s comrades carry whistleblowing forward at equal risk. Mzwakhe Sithebe and Yussuf Kader are fellow activists who fight corruption in KZN and are often ridiculed for doing so.

“During the apartheid era we were fighting for justice together with Grishen Bujram. Now, in a democratic country, we are still faced with the same tendencies. The problem is people driven by greed,” says Sithebe.

“The problem is that politicians have been elevated and are like a law [unto] themselves. We will always fight for justice. The issue of being eliminated unfortunately is the fate for all of us who stand against corruption. We will raise questions that need to be raised irrespective of who will be offended and decide to kill us. We have lost a number of whistleblowers in this area. We need some kind of system that protects people willing to come forward with sensitive information.”

Kader, a businessman who now drives a bulletproof car, says whistleblowers risk their lives for the good of the country.

“Houses of the poorest of the poor are being taken by those in power. Some RDP houses get sold and there is a lot of inside corruption which we continue to fight against,” says Kader.

Because of the corruption, Kader has written a letter demanding the dismissal of five government employees.

“As it stands, I can be killed at any time but I am not afraid to die for the poorest of the poor.”

Endumeni Municipality’s Mayor Thulani Mahaye, the successor to Mayor Nukani, encourages people to come forward with any information that exposes irregularities.

“I am proud of the police and the community right now. They are working together to make this area safer and ensure arrests are made when a crime is committed. If someone needs to blow the whistle and they are afraid of being eliminated, they can secretly come forward and protection will be given to them,” he says.

Despite this, controversy over houses, that saw the death of Bujram, rumbles on.

A five-minute drive outside Dundee lies the small town of Glencoe. Its residents are up in arms against the municipality. They allege 71 names, for RDP houses, in Glencoe’s Sithembile Phase 2 projects, have been removed from the list.

“It is unclear how so many people lost houses they had applied, and had been approved, for. It can only be corruption. People’s names are disappearing from the list or being withdrawn without reason. For some people, untrue claims of application withdrawals are even made,” says Glencoe resident Sifiso Madi.

“An RDP house that I applied for was approved but when the houses were built they said I withdrew my application which I never did. They also said that they looked for me to come and sign documents but didn’t find me. This is not true because no one ever contacted me or my next of kin, sent a letter or came to where I stay to look for me,” says one Dundee woman who wants to remain anonymous for fear of retribution.

Another frustrated resident says “my cousin died in 2008 but an RDP house had been approved for him. He left dependants, so in 2013 when the houses were being built I decided to check on the progress to make sure his children have a place to stay. Funnily enough, they gave me a list that says my cousin withdrew the application. How is that possible when he is dead? Did he wake up from his grave to withdraw it? I asked the human settlement people to show me where my cousin signed to withdraw his application for

**“I AM NOT AFRAID TO DIE FOR THE POOREST OF THE POOR.”**

the house he had already been approved for, but obviously, because it never happened, they were not able to provide any proof.”

Many who rocked the boat like Bujram also paid with their lives.

In June, just 55 kilometers from Dundee, Vusi Ntombela, an Nquthu Municipality council speaker for the ANC, and teacher and deputy principal at Luvisi Primary School, was gunned down while teaching a Grade 6 class. A gunman walked into his classroom and shot him four times. Two pupils were caught in the crossfire. Thirteen-year-old Elizabeth Nhleko died from a stray bullet.

The widow, Thembelihle Ntombela, told journalists she believes Vusi was killed because of tensions within the ANC. In December last year, Vusi had resisted an instruction from the ANC sub-region to resign as speaker. His murder is allegedly related to political tensions in the governing party’s Inkosi Bhambatha region and in the council itself.

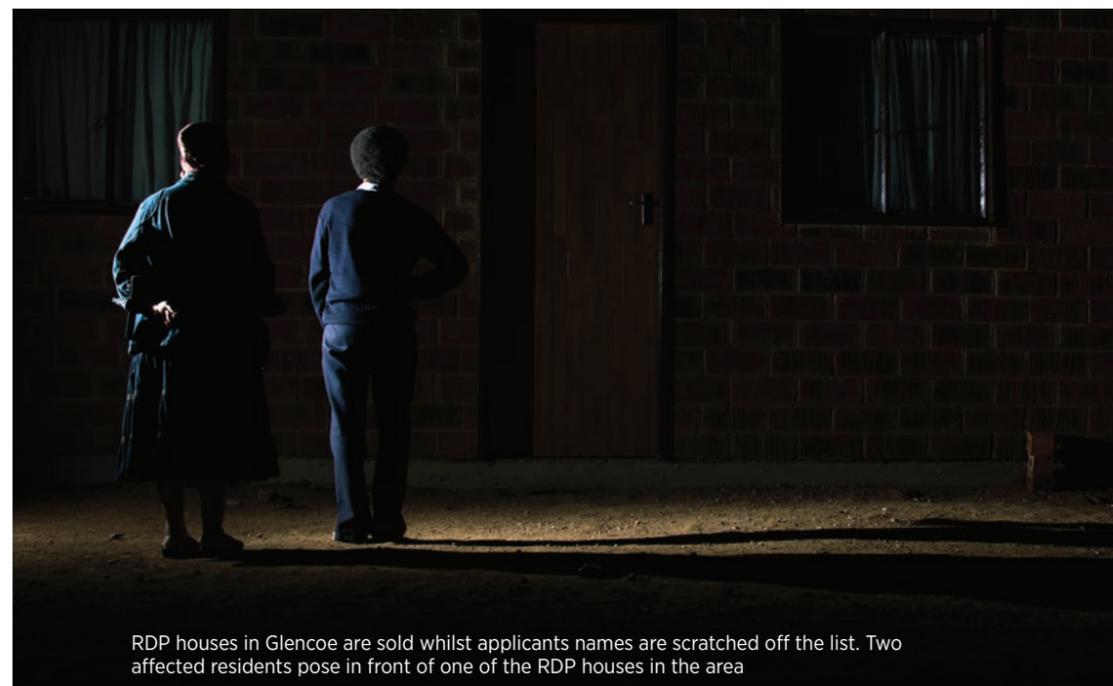
Police arrested Mbhekiseni Khambule and Sibongiseni Mdakane for the murder. Khambule is the bodyguard of Nquthu mayor, Emily Molefe. Mdakane was later sentenced to life imprisonment. He confessed that he had been promised R15,000 (around \$1,100) for the hit by his co-accused.

In May 2008, Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP) councillor Peter Nxele was shot dead in his driveway for speaking out against corruption just a week after raising questions about R50,000 (\$3,700) that had gone missing from a council business grant. He also requested a forensic audit into the spending of the Endumeni municipality. One of the five men accused of gunning down Nxele is Bongani Shangase, the same man who killed Bujram.

In June 2009, 124 kilometers from Dundee where Bujram was killed, Tony Malunga, an ANC councillor and regional executive committee member, was gunned down at his home in Greytown. He was allegedly killed because of his fight against corruption. Malunga was found lying in a pool of blood outside the ANC offices.

Back in Dundee, Shirley Bujram vows to fight for justice for her husband’s murder.

“My husband was diabetic but a month before he died he said to me he was not going to be killed by diabetes because there is a bullet there for him; and by the bullet he died.”



RDP houses in Glencoe are sold whilst applicants names are scratched off the list. Two affected residents pose in front of one of the RDP houses in the area