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South Africa

# Durban's latest Rain Bomb kills more than 300 and unveils state climate sloth

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**Floods again ravaged South Africa's third-largest city, Durban, killing at least 300 residents on Monday, forcing thousands more to evacuate their homes, and preventing movement of people and emergency goods due to collapsed roads and bridges. In vast areas of the city, broken water reticulation pipes and the electricity system's collapse have left taps dry and power out for days. (Pictures are [here](#).)**

The toll in lost human life exceeds Durban's prior record of 64 deaths from the "Rain Bomb" of April 2019, when 168 millimeters fell in 24 hours, doing at least \$75 million in damage. In October 2017, 108 mm fell in one day, killing 11.

Going back further, in 2011 Durban hosted the annual United Nations COP17 climate summit, generally [considered a global policy failure](#) (though not according to U.S. State Department negotiator Todd Stern who [celebrated](#) to Hillary Clinton what he termed a "significant success for the United States"). Still, city officials appeared numb to the imminent threat, [not bothering to make basic infrastructure repairs](#) after 2017 even in high-profile sites like the violence-afflicted Glebelands migrant labour hostel whose roof was not repaired two years later.

On Monday, the skies dumped 351mm. Once again, it was obvious that Durban municipality (officially known as eThekweni), KwaZulu-Natal province and the national state government all lack a genuine commitment to climate-crisis adaptation, including sufficiently robust civil engineering and simple maintenance of already-inadequate stormwater drainage systems. State housing provision and construction standards for thousands of the city's residential structures were revealed as inadequate. Hardest hit were Durban's poor communities: of the city's 550 informal shack settlements, at least 164 are located in floodplains.

## Greenwashed Durban

The municipality is often accused of slacking on climate protection, in spite of backslapping rhetoric to the contrary – e.g., in 2020, [claiming](#) "to be at the cutting edge of climate change action, assisted by its progressive leadership and engagement within... the C40 Leadership Group" (a network [promoted](#) by former New York mayor Michael Bloomberg). There is far too much praise by [out-of-touch scholars](#), although, occasionally, journalists [separate](#) fact from C40 fiction.

The [2019 Durban Climate Action Plan](#) lacks urgency, although at least it is premised on what climate scientists were predicting a decade before: dry areas will be much prone to drought, and wet coastal and eastern areas of South Africa much rainier, with greater intensity of extreme weather events.

But no can deny Durban's notorious [green-washing](#), which even entailed a 2014 WWF award nomination for which city bureaucrats [hired a professional internet trickster](#) who hijacked twitter accounts, partly to promote a failed World Bank carbon-trading scheme.

And in 2018, notwithstanding [media reports](#) of then-Mayor Zandile Gumede's impending prosecution on multiple corruption and solid-waste procurement-scam charges, the San Francisco Global Climate Action Summit's "One Planet City Challenge" [recognised](#) Durban as "a leader in climate action" because it "continues to combine ambitious targets and focused action with community development initiatives." Gumede was from 2016 until [her mid-2019 arrest and forced resignation](#), the C40 urban climate network's [Vice Chair](#), again revealing the shallow incompetence of

global climate elites.

## Talk generous and green, walk stingy and dirty

In the same spirit, immediately after Durban's 2019 Rain Bomb, President Cyril Ramaphosa [visited](#) – alongside Gumede – to survey the damage, [conceding](#) that “the force of nature is so huge and this is partly what climate change is about that it just hits when we least expect it.”

As for emergency relief and paying for what termed by the United Nations “Loss & Damage” costs, he [promised](#): “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.”

Yet only \$6.25 million was [then provided by Treasury](#) to meet emergency housing needs: just 14% of the [city's own estimate](#) of the April storm's \$46 million in residential damage, itself considered low given the scale of the destruction and need for proper reconstruction.

On Wednesday Ramaphosa returned to Durban to visit flood victims, and [pledged](#), “This disaster is part of climate change. It is telling us that climate change is serious, it is here. We no longer can postpone what we need to do, and the measures we need to take to deal with climate change.”

Notwithstanding soothing words, his hypocrisy was glaring, for prior to 2016, [when he sold his private conglomerate Shanduka](#), Ramaphosa was so desperate to dig for coal that he [failed to obtain required water licenses](#) (apparently due to [regulatory corruption](#)), [displaced local residents](#) and also teamed up with the notorious Swiss-based corporation Glencore at a time the latter was [facing international lawsuits on dozens of ethics grounds](#). (The point was [not lost on locals](#) who remember its founder Marc Rich's role in apartheid-era sanctions-busting.) A year ago, even some former Ramaphosala bour-based allies rounded on him, given plausible [concerns](#) he favoured Glencore's coal division at consumers' expense during a 2014-15 electricity pricing battle when Ramaphosa was already serving as South Africa's deputy president.

[Until South Africa was threatened](#) with trade-related climate sanctions last year, Ramaphosa proved resistant to activist demands that the state curtail its destructive love affair with fossil fuels, electricity-intensive deep mining, refining and smelting. For example, last July, in order to fight a Mozambican insurgency in the gas-rich Cabo Delgado province, Ramaphosa deployed more than 1000 army troops and much-needed helicopters (leaving only one in Durban for emergency rescues this week). They are mainly [defending the interests of Western and Chinese oil companies](#) drilling at the world's [fourth-largest methane field](#). The insurgents continue to operate from the shadows although Total has announced a resumption of its gas drilling and processing.

Why the sudden turn to meth-addict energy? In 2020 Ramaphosa's public enterprise minister – who a decade earlier as finance minister had [arranged](#) for the World Bank's largest-ever loan, to pay for the world's largest coal-fired plants then under construction – hired a former executive of Sasol known as “Mr Coal” to run Eskom, the electricity parastatal. There, in mid-2021, he [announced](#) 44% of his “Just Energy Transition” funds – including \$8.5 billion in supposed decarbonisation finance from last November's Glasgow COP26 – would convert coal-fired power plants into methane gas plants (and new ones would be built). It is now widely understood that methane is far more potent than CO<sub>2</sub>, and indeed is now measured as eighty times worse over the course of a century.

The Ramaphosa government's other ongoing contributions to the climate crisis are prolific. The first presidential infrastructure priority mega-project within the [National Development Plan](#) (whose 2012 deputy chair was Ramaphosa) is to export 18 billion tons of coal from a site in his parents' home province, Limpopo; if associated rail and power infrastructure is ever completed, it will [cost at least \\$100 billion](#). His Transnet team is [hell-bent](#) on privatising rail lines so as to increase coal exports— last year, just 59 million tons thanks to thieves and vandals — back to 75 million a year.

Also in Limpopo, his government [promotes](#) the \$17 billion Chinese-driven Musina-Makhado Special Economic Zone MMSEZ (located next to his traditional home village), one proudly [announced](#) in 2018 after he and Xi Jinping co-chaired the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation: “The following projects within the MMSEZ have been prioritised for implementation: a 4600MW coal-fired plant, a cement plant and other metallurgical projects.” Even without the originally-planned coal generator, which [climate activists appear to have defeated](#) last month, “other metallurgical projects” will emit 34 megatons of CO2 annually, [according to officials](#). Hence by 2030, if the project proceeds, they will comprise 8% of the 420 megaton national pollution target.

Meanwhile without presidential objection, Ramaphosa's energy minister recklessly [pushes](#) methane gas and coal, his environment minister [rejects](#) court orders to cut pollution at the two largest greenhouse gas emitters (Eskom and Sasol), and his finance minister [delays](#) (by more years) ratcheting up what is an absurdly low carbon tax, one currently [just \\$0.42/ton](#) due to exemptions, compared to most recent estimates of a [\\$3000/ton cost of carbon](#).

## The cost of *not* transitioning justly

The latter point is vital, because by applying a [rudimentary “polluter pays” principle](#) as a means of raising funds — but in a progressive not regressive way (as did [French](#) and [Ecuadorian](#) governments in 2018-19, generating massive social protests) — funds could be raised for not only Loss & Damage reparations, but also for necessary climate-proofing investments in poor communities.

Thanks to dramatically-increased unemployment in these areas due to Covid-19, there are pent-up supplies of construction labourers and general workers who can repair and strengthen drainage systems, rebuild damaged roads, construct sturdier houses and safer bridges, restore wetlands and rehabilitate riverine systems to act as a sponge. Solar and wind energy plus public transit improvements also need generous subsidies. By one account, a “[million climate jobs](#)” could be provided here, were there the political will.

But government broke many promises to “build back better” after the Covid-19 economic lockdown. Even though in October 2020, Ramaphosa [committed](#) the state to hiring 800 000 new workers, Treasury's unprecedented budget cuts [kicked in](#) soon thereafter. That dried up the funding needed not only to repair damaged infrastructure, but to implement a genuine “Just Transition”: support for workers dislocated by decarbonisation, whether in the coal fields or South Durban's refinery complex (where both Engen and Sapref recently reached the end of their lifespans).

Had more state funds been available for Durban's 2019 recovery — and ring-fenced so as not to fall victim to Gumede's alleged graft tendencies — the necessary climate adaptation work could have taken place. Yet as local journalist Des Erasmus [remarked](#) this week, an underlying case of malgovernance cannot be disguised: “Local and provincial government spoke of climate change until they were reminded that notwithstanding climate change, poor infrastructure, drainage and sewer maintenance, poorly-built houses, and allowing residents to build homes on river banks had also significantly contributed to the fallout.”

What sort of climate-resilient investments are needed? A first vital step is improving early warning systems and

floodpreparedness, since the SA Weather Service [admitted](#) that it vastly underestimated the storm's power. Other labour-intensive construction is needed for small dams and seawalls; stronger roads and bridge reinforcements; better-quality pipes and water treatment; back-up generators for pumping stations; firebreaks; and much more effective stormwater drainage, including maintenance.

Most obviously, improvements in housing stability are required across the working-class areas of the city, as well as for all structures built on vulnerable hills and near oceans and rivers. And much more investment is needed in green infrastructure, including better maintenance of forests, floodplains and wetlands.

## Elusive red-green politics

To get there, the balance of forces will need deep, urgent change. How that happens is still unclear, given that although Ramaphosa is fast losing power internally within his badly-divided ANC party – which scored only 42% in the 2021 election (25% lower than it did 20 years ago) and lost most major cities to centre-right opposition parties – a new danger has arisen: far-right, xenophobic organising in working-class communities targeting African and Asian immigrants (reminiscent of Brexit, Trump, Bolsonaro, Duterte, Orban, etc).

At the same time, there are major splits in the progressive community: two different climate justice coalitions, a [terrible cleavage in the left labour movement](#), ongoing disconnections between community activists fighting similar battles but without organisational coherence, and other well-known woes the independent left faces everywhere.

Desperation to change that power balance has led some brave Climate Justice Charter Movement activists to call for [international sanctions against Ramaphosa's government](#), reflecting their valid sense that this kind of punishment is what motivates elites, as demonstrated in 1985 when anti-apartheid sanctions bit hard. In addition, a wedge may well be driven by the European Union's (and other Western) Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism climate tariffs sufficiently deep as to break the bloc of high-carbon emitters away from the rest of the economy. [Responding directly to the Durban Rain Bomb](#), that movement and Durban-based [Oceans Not Oil](#) also [opened a case of culpable homicide](#) against top government officials, including Ramaphosa.

Another place to look for optimism is ordinary Durban residents, who are striving to provide mutual aid (especially the respected emergency relief group [Gift of the Givers](#)) and toughen their already-vibrant [critiques](#) of local, provincial and national governments. Over the past half-century, the city's activists have often been at the epicenter of such struggles: in 1973 with port worker organising that helped seed a national labor movement; in mid-1980s community-based anti-apartheid resistance; in the late-1990s "We are the Poors" movement that reignited urban social movements; in the 2005 rise from the shack lands of the impressive group Abahlalibase Mjondolo (now [raising funds](#) to support flood victims); and in environmental justice advocacy by the NGO [groundWork](#) and especially the [South Durban Community Environmental Alliance](#).

They may help the broader society determine, once again, how to fight oppression with an organisational response, one that transcends handwringing, meagre reforms and charity, no matter that emergency relief is needed for hundreds of thousands of people right now. The one certainty is that the latest Durban Rain Bomb heralds far more profound climate injustices to come.

*Johannesburg, April 14*

Source [Global Ecosocialist Network](#).

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