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Transforming victims into active citizens

OPENING STATEMENT FROM KHULUMANI SUPPORT GROUP TO THE OFFICIAL OPENING OF THE TRC INQUIRY, 11 FEBRUARY 2026: Khulumani National Steering Committee Chairperson, Mr M W Lipile

Honourable Chairperson of the Inquiry Justice Khampepe, Honourable Commissioners and Fellow South Africans, I make this opening statement on behalf of Khulumani Support Group and its members and associates, in my role as Chairperson of its National Steering Committee. Khulumani Support Group is the national membership organisation of victims and survivors of apartheid atrocities and human rights violations. Khulumani members lived the history of the struggle against apartheid and those who have survived, continue to carry the consequences of their violations.

Khulumani Support Group was founded in 1995 at the time that Parliament initiated debates about the proposal to host a Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Victims and survivors received no invitations to inform the debates. Subsequently, Mrs Sylvia Dlomo-Jele, and Mrs Catherine Mlangeni as former members of the Detainees' Parents' Support Committee, initiated community dialogues, each attended by hundreds of survivors. The question they debated was the wisdom of participating when they had been excluded from the planning for the TRC from the start. The consensus was reached that participation was preferable because of the hope that this might contribute to an agenda of redress. That hope has seen almost no realisation over these past years.

This Inquiry takes place 31 years since the debates of 1995 and is characterised by extraordinarily limited terms of reference. The ambit of the inquiry reinforces for survivors the sense that the state has long turned its back on the majority of the people who paid with their lives to bring them to power. This perception is reinforced by the experience of extended delays in initiating the Inquiry, attributable to the recurrent attempts of the politically connected to intervene to halt or to delay the important work of truth.

The prolonged delays have meant hundreds have died without being heard, their voices now permanently silenced. Thousands have grown old without recognition and the weight of the wounds from the past carried by ordinary people,

keeps growing, intensified by the levels of disrespect meted out by those in positions of authority to the wounded, who carry deeply unsettled accounts about our history. Many who gave the best years of their lives to a life of struggle for justice and dignity, have voiced to us their sense that they wasted their lives in service to a vision, that has faded beyond any recognition in the present. How did this become our current political reality?

Tragically, South Africa in 2026 has not aligned itself with the African Union agenda of its declared Decade of Reparatory Justice (2026 to 2036). South Africa has in contrast continued to regard reparation as a mere symbolic demand, rather than as a matter of justice, dignity and development.

The situation has been characterised by a complete lack of whole-heartedness in dealing with the serious violations of apartheid with a Truth and Reconciliation Commission that generated only 17,600 acknowledged victims of apartheid gross human rights violations to the present. Only these individuals with their children and grandchildren have been recognised as eligible for the limited reparatory measures that have emerged from the TRC Implementation Unit in the Department of Justice.

It has been under the direction of the state that the TRC Unit has been complicit in almost completely ignoring the draft Reparation and Rehabilitation Policy that Professor Hlengiwe Mkhize, in her capacity as Chair of the TRC Committee on Reparation and Rehabilitation, constructed from her direct engagements with survivor communities across the country. It became evident that the state had long decided that the people damaged by apartheid atrocities, could be left to their own devices, abandoned by those it had brought to power, as if they were damaged goods, in a situation where Khulumani's experience has been of the remarkable capacity of survivors to serve the nation as *wounded healers*.

The state assumed the role of intermittently promulgating ad hoc regulations on reparation to address only the 17,600 victims and survivors out of the 22,000 statements the TRC collected while it was active. It has been only these individuals who have received the TRR number that qualifies them for the limited reparation the state has approved. Around 100,000 proud struggle activists have received no reparatory support. They have been silenced and ignored. As they have aged, their suffering has deepened while those in positions of power turning a blind eye and a deaf ear to their calls and appeals that Khulumani Support Group continues to receive every week. This suffering cannot be ignored at the cost of the well-being of our country, especially given that R2,16 billion remains in the Victim Reparation Fund (The President's Fund) that Khulumani Support Group has had to continuously fight to protect for the purpose for which it was established through contributions of supportive donor governments. Their goodwill has long dissipated.

Through decades of survivor-led, community-based work, Khulumani Support Group has documented more than 120,000 victim statements of apartheid-era gross human rights violations. These testimonies come from across South Africa — rural and urban, women and men, families of the dead and disappeared, survivors of detention, torture, displacement, and political violence.

The difference between 17,600 and more than 120,000 is not a technical discrepancy. It is the consequence of deliberate exclusion. It speaks loudly to the limits of the original TRC process with its restricted mandates, narrow definitions of harm, short timeframes, geographic barriers, fear, trauma, and poverty. Many victims simply could not reach the Commission in time or could not speak when speaking still carried danger. When the TRC closed, victimhood did not end. But recognition did.

For those excluded, non-recognition became a second injustice. Reparations were designed and delivered on the basis of a partial victim population, leaving the majority of survivors outside the moral and material concern of the democratic state.

This Inquiry therefore carries a profound responsibility. Not merely to review past findings, but to confront the consequences of exclusion. Not to treat victim recognition as a closed administrative exercise, but as a continuing obligation rooted in dignity and justice.

Khulumani's presence here is not oppositional. It is evidentiary. Khulumani's database is not symbolic. It is a record of lived harm. Khulumani's leadership is not abstract. It is grounded in communities that have waited far too long.

We urge this Inquiry to resist political pressure, procedural narrowing, and the temptation of premature closure. Truth cannot be managed for convenience. Reconciliation cannot be achieved through silence. Justice cannot be postponed without cost.

This Inquiry has an opportunity — and a duty — to affirm that the lives of those previously excluded still matter, that their suffering still counts, and that reparatory justice in South Africa remains possible.

We appear before you not to reopen old wounds, but because these wounds were never healed. We call for all forms of political interference to be ended — the dishonouring politics of the state and the abusive politics Khulumani has had to face at the hands of former civil society partners.

We will not be deterred in our sustained struggle for justice, fairness and dignity.

Thank you.