

# Mystery of Maritzburg's masked murderers

Greg Ardé 6 August 2020 <https://www.newframe.com/mystery-of-maritzburgs-masked-murderers/>

Two people died and several were injured as a result of a series of shootings in broad daylight on a busy Pietermaritzburg street. Families of the victims say the shooters were police disguised as bandits. Footage of the fatal shooting recorded on various closed circuit television cameras (CCTV) paints a vivid picture of the events of 10 July 2020 when migrant traders were hit in what they say was violent police extortion. The South African Police Service (SAPS) will say nothing more than that the Independent Police Investigative Directorate (Ipid) is probing the matter. Traders who witnessed the shooting claim their attempts to help identify the killers were spurned by police who told them to “fuck off”. Ethiopian migrant Mamush Fune and fellow traders interviewed by *New Frame* at the scene tell a terrifying story of brutality and xenophobia.

The shootings occurred in a block bordered by West and Pietermaritz streets in an area with a radius of about 650 metres. West Street is home to formal high street businesses: supermarkets, petrol stations, a butchery, a motor repair shop and the like. West intersects with Pietermaritz, a road lined with Jacaranda trees and old colonial houses mostly used for informal businesses: tuckshops and wholesale suppliers to spaza shops. The street typifies the neglect of basic service provision in Pietermaritzburg: mangy dogs hop across gutters choked with litter, animal bones and other waste. The area is dominated by migrant traders, mostly Ethiopian. Three of the men who were shot were Ethiopian. A fourth is Malawian.

## Armed gang

According to eyewitnesses and footage from some of the road-facing shops, masked shooters arrived at 8.20am. One eyewitness says there was a gang of eight. CCTV footage shows six people getting out of a double cab bakkie, registration number NVH574b, with a cage at the back. The footage shows five men and a woman, some wearing distinctive workwear trousers with reflective bands on the legs. Traders described their gear as “municipal” overalls. Some wore caps and hoodies. The woman is seen adjusting a holstered gun. They walked down from West Street towards Pietermaritz Street. A staffer at a tuckshop in Pietermaritz Street, one of the first targets of the gang, says when they arrived they demanded that everyone lie down. The commotion attracted the attention of neighbouring traders. Eyewitnesses say it looked like a police raid, but there were no police uniforms or badges, just armed men in “municipal” workwear and civvies. They were obviously masked because of Covid-19. The noise of the raid emboldened neighbouring traders to draw closer, shouting at the gang, demanding they identify themselves. This appears to have thrown the group off, and they broke up, running in different directions, chased at a distance by angry traders who say they are often harassed by police. One shooter ran about 80m east and outside 29 Pietermaritz Street encountered Selema Tesfay, a trader from Edendale who had just parked his van to collect supplies. Mamush Fune says the person shot Tesfay in the head. The young man fell down and lay bleeding on the pavement. Fune says he pursued the shooter at a distance. A police car came down the road, and Fune frantically flagged it down, jumping into the van and urging cops to race towards Boom Street where the shooter had fled. Within minutes they came upon him. Fune shouted: “That’s him!” The police van pulled up beside the gunman who opened the back door and got in. Fune says he was aghast. “He pointed the gun at me and told me to get out.” Horrified, Fune fled.

## Shooting his way out

Meanwhile, the commotion ramped up on Pietermaritz Street. CCTV footage from a trader shows men dressed in workwear with reflectors on the trousers and armed with guns chasing people. People can be seen diving for cover behind trees and vehicles. Some threw rocks at the shooters.

Up the road in West Street, another drama unfolded. A gunman had been chased by traders into a motor mechanic's workshop. He was holed up in the toilet there. The workshop has road access through a roller shutter door. There is a small office reception area to the right and the rest of the workshop is chockablock with cars on ramps. At the back, another roller shutter door leads to a courtyard with a toilet. It is surrounded by high walls topped with barbed wire fencing. Danie Holtshausen is a mechanic and the owner of the garage. He says he was outside because of the disturbance in the road and one of the shooters dashed in, past the cars and hid in the toilet. Holtshausen says: "It all happened quickly." He didn't see the gunman. He only ran into his workshop when he heard cries for help from staff. They told him a man had been holed up in the toilet shouting into a radio or cellphone that he was being chased. "He said he was going to shoot himself out." And he did. A migrant trader, Elias Wolde, who had chased the shooter in from the road, was badly injured from a gunshot wound in the thigh. When *New Frame* visited, the bloodstained workshop floor and splintered toilet door bore testimony to the shooting. Soon afterwards, an ambulance arrived and parked at the petrol station diagonally across the road from the workshop. CCTV footage from there shows police cordoned the area off. In addition to Wolde and Tesfay, who both later died in hospital, two others were shot and injured, Kadre Ergudo, an Ethiopian trader and Osman Essa, a migrant from Malawi. Essa says he was making his way home from working night shift at another petrol station nearby when he found himself amid the commotion. "I was on the corner of Pietermaritz and Loop streets, and I heard shooting. People started running past me. I didn't know what was happening. I realised I was shot in the arm." A migrant trader told *New Frame* cops frequently bullied traders, including himself, demanding cash and cigarettes. "We are scared. The police take a chance. They ask for [business] licences. Then they search the store. They ask to see cigarettes in the back storeroom. I ask why. The cigarettes are in my stock, not on the shelf. We hope we will get justice. This is not right. This is not the legal way. They want to finish us one by one. We are foreigners, but we know the rule of law," the man said.

### **The right to live**

Abate Tumevo, an Ethiopian elder who has been in South Africa for 14 years, spoke to *New Frame* at the wake held for Tesfay and Wolde. The silence of the ceremony was punctuated by the wailing of young men who slapped their heads in anguish. Hands outstretched, an impassioned Tumevo said through an interpreter: "The police often come in groups to search our shops, especially since lockdown. They use force. They intimidate. They disconnect the CCTV then they take stock and money. When we try to open a case, the police treat us like guilty people and refuse to act. They follow us to our houses and victimise us. I come from Africa. This is Africa. They call us *makwerekwere*, but I have a right to live in Africa." A week after the shooting, police and army hit the Pietermaritzburg central business district again in a show of force. According to the *Weekend Witness*, police arrived with troops and home affairs officials, rounding up migrant traders and arresting 57 people. Cartons of cigarettes were seized. *Witness* reporter Clive Ndou wrote that the bustling business precinct resembled "a war zone, with heavily armed soldiers", one of whom was overheard screaming: "You came to my country to commit crime. We won't allow you to do as you like." Police, he wrote, used crowbars to break stores open and army nyalas blocked roads and cut off escape routes. "The shop owners, some of whom were visibly terrified, were made to stand in the middle of the road from where they were loaded into police vans."

Ndou quoted Economic Development, Tourism and Environmental Affairs MEC Nomusa Dube-Ncube saying her department's consumer complaints unit had "a responsibility to protect businesses conducting their operations according to the book against bogus business owners who have no respect for the law." Attacks on migrants in South Africa have escalated dramatically since Covid-19 and continue in spite of widespread condemnation by organisations demanding an urgent end to the xenophobia. The KwaZulu-Natal Christian Council has expressed concern over attacks on migrants and raised the issue at a recent meeting with KwaZulu-Natal premier Sihle Zikalala. Ipid spokesperson Ndileka Cola failed to respond to questions.