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## **South Africa: Judge must oversee probe into mine protest deaths**

A judge must oversee any investigation into the deaths of 34 people after South African police opened fire on protesting miners at the Marikana mine complex, Amnesty International said today.

The organization also called for an urgent resolution to the ongoing disputes and conflict between the rival unions and management at the mine north of Johannesburg, which resulted in 10 other deaths earlier this week.

The calls come amid concern that the new National Commissioner of Police, Riah Phiyega, appeared to have already reached the conclusion that the police were justified in using lethal force after she told a press conference today that "...the militant group stormed toward the police, firing shots and wielding dangerous weapons ... police were forced to use maximum force to defend themselves".

"The high number of deaths and injuries after police opened fire on protesting mine workers is shocking and shows an appalling disregard for human life," said Noel Kukatwa, Southern Africa Director at Amnesty International.

"Although the police appeared to have used a range of lower levels of force initially in a bid to disperse the demonstrators, some of whom were armed, the circumstances leading to the resort to prolonged firing of automatic weapons and live ammunition has to be urgently investigated, along with other aspects of command and control in the police operation that day.

"Even if a group is armed, under international standards relating to the use of force and firearms, law enforcement officials are still obliged to use the minimum force possible."

South Africa's Independent Police Investigative Directorate (IPID) has initiated an investigation into the incident at Marikana and that an internal police investigation appears to have also begun.

But Amnesty International believes that, in view of the gravity of the incident, its longer term consequences and the recurring use of excessive force by police, there should be judicial oversight of any official investigation with public reporting back of the findings and recommendations for urgent implementation.

Prior to Thursday's shooting, 10 people are reported to have been killed - including two police officers and two security guards - amid conflict during the past week at the Marikana mine run by Lonmin, the world's third-biggest platinum producer.

South Africa is home to four-fifths of the world's known platinum reserves.