

Apartheid-era death of human rights activist under fresh scrutiny, almost 40 years later

The inquest into the death apparently by hanging of human rights activist Dr Neil Aggett in 1982 will re-convene in January, aiming to bring answers and justice for his family.



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The inquest into the death of well-known anti-apartheid activist Dr Neil Aggett, found hanging in his prison cell on 5 February 1982, will be re-opened in the South Gauteng High Court in Johannesburg on 20 January 2020.

Judge President Mlambo has appointed Judge Motsamai Makume to preside over the re-opened inquest. Five weeks have been set aside for hearings.

The details were confirmed at a meeting on Friday, 13 September, between Judge Makume, attorneys Webber Wentzel, who are acting pro-bono for the Aggett family, and the National Prosecuting Authority.

Aggett, who was 28 when he died, was a medical doctor and trade unionist who worked in poor communities including Baragwanath Hospital. At the time, the police claimed he had committed suicide.

He had been detained without trial and interrogated at the notorious John Vorster Square police station for 70 days.

The re-opening of the inquest into Aggett's death is only the third of 300 cases that were referred for further investigation and possible prosecution by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), which carried out most of its hearings between 1995 and 1999.

In 2017, the re-convened inquest into the 1971 death of activist Ahmed Timol found he was pushed from a window at John Vorster Square, and did not commit suicide, as the original inquest held in 1972 had concluded. Webber Wentzel also acted pro-bono for the Timol family.

Other suspicious apartheid-era deaths that are being, or expected to be, re-examined in the near future include those of Nokuthula Simelane, Imam Haron, Dr Hoosen Haffejee and the Cradock 4, says Webber Wentzel partner Moray Hathorn, who heads the firm's pro-bono department.

"This is amongst the first of three cases (Timol and Simelane are the other two) to be re-opened that involved the apparent murder of detainees by the former security branch," Hathorn says.

"The referral by the TRC for further investigation has been delayed by decades, but the families of those detainees continue to seek justice before it is too late."

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