

Parties circle the political air after Marikana

Human Rights Day dawned like no other in the Nkaneng informal settlement, the site of last year's violent mine workers' strike that led to the killing of 44 people.

On the outskirts of the impoverished shantytown, a stage and PA system were set up in anticipation of United Democratic Movement (UDM) leader Bantu Holomisa's arrival.

The stage was set up at the exact spot where a few days after police killed 34 miners on August 16 last year, Julius Malema hijacked what was supposed to be a memorial service for the dead in an attempt to resurrect his waning political career.

By midday on Thursday, a crowd of about 2 000 were gathered in the autumn sun, some perched precariously on an electric pylon to catch a glimpse of the man who once ruled the former homeland of Transkei, where many of the mine workers at Rustenburg's platinum belt hail from.

Buses had brought in people from informal settlements around Rustenburg and a local isiXhosa cultural band, Sdudla, was roped in to provide entertainment.

Just as Malema did last year, the former Transkei leader also worked the crowd into a frenzy, taking pot shots at Jacob Zuma and Cyril Ramaphosa. His supporters, resembling a swarm of bees in the bright yellow UDM T-shirts bearing Holomisa's face, reacted to his comments with thunderous applause.

He said he'd received many complaints from Lonmin employees claiming they had not received the 22% increase that was part of the agreement to end last year's strike. He had written a letter to the mining company and gave copies to the Association of Mineworkers and Construction Union (Amcu).

Lonmin workers recently held a meeting at which they discussed going on strike again, saying their wages had not been increased. The

decision to go on strike was called off and, instead, union leaders resolved to engage the Commission for Conciliation, Mediation and Arbitration.

Holomisa's rally was not the only planned political activity in Nkaneng on Thursday. A few minutes' walk away, in the nearby village of Wonderkop, the Marikana Support Campaign had announced plans to host a meeting featuring political parties from the left.

The campaign, led by Rehad Desai, is a coalition of NGOs and community organisations he says are involved in fundraising campaigns, allegedly for the benefit of the families of the 34 mine workers killed by police last year. Desai's group, its people dressed in black T-shirts inscribed in red, are always followed by a camera

Lucas Ledwaba

crew recording their activities.

But on Thursday, their gathering at the Wonderkop community hall - which was attended by delegates from the the Pan Africanist Congress of Azania, the African People's Convention, the Democratic Left Front, the National Council of Trade Unions and mine workers dressed in Amcu T-shirts - drew less than 100 people. The show went on anyway, cameras rolling to capture Desai and community activist Trevor Ngwane making speeches condemning police brutality and calling for National Police Commissioner Riah Phiyega's resignation.

Late last year, the DA also jumped on the Marikana bandwagon, organising a memorial service near the site where Holomisa had his rally on Thursday. The DA erected a number of white crosses at the foot of the koppie where the striking mine workers had gathered in the days leading up to the August 16 shooting.

Holomisa, who wore a stylish

maroon shirt with "Vote UDM" written on it, denied that he had hosted the event to garner support after last year's killings.

"Marikana is part of South Africa," he told City Press. "Nobody is going to tell me where to pitch my tent."

The Marikana tragedy also saw the emergence of the Democratic Socialist Movement last year, which established workers' committees leading to a series of wildcat strikes.

In Pretoria on Thursday, this movement launched a political party called the Workers and Socialist Party. The organisation said it would contest next year's general election on a pro-nationalisation ticket and was an affiliate of the Committee for a Workers' International League.

In the streets of Nkaneng and Marikana, mine workers sport T-shirts bearing the colours and slogans of various political parties, a sign that politicians eyeing next year's general election are already circling in search of votes.