

South Africa's ANC government employs police blockade to trap illegal gold miners underground

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The High Court in Pretoria, South Africa, issued an interim order at the weekend instructing the police to lift the blockade of “illegal” gold miners trapped underground at the abandoned Buffelsfontein Mine and allow them to exit.

This has enabled local communities near the mine in Stilfontein, 100 miles south-west of Johannesburg, to begin delivering food and emergency supplies to the miners.

The case, to be subject to a full hearing this week, casts a spotlight on the social apocalypse that has hit workers in the resource-rich country and its neighbours.

The police's murderous tactics, dubbed “surrender or starve”, have caused outrage in South Africa where unemployment has soared to 42 percent and economic desperation is widespread in the world's most unequal society.

Local people blame the government for the stand-off. According to local news outlets, they have been gathering around the mineshafts holding placards saying, “Free our brothers” and “Smoke out the ANC” [the African National Congress, the ruling party of President Cyril Ramaphosa]. They say the situation is so desperate, they are starving, and they have no option without government aid but to go underground, where they typically stay for months, searching for gold. Another said that even prisoners were not left to die.

The South African Human Rights Commission (SAHRC) has begun an investigation into a formal complaint from a Stilfontein community leader. The complaint alleges that police had blocked for nearly three months the delivery to a mine shaft of essential supplies such as food, water and medication, with an actual and/or potential loss of life, violating the miners' right to life as protected under Section 11 of the Constitution.

Yasmin Omar, one of the lawyers who brought the legal challenge, told the public broadcaster *SABC News*, “But to trap people underground, to starve them and allow them to die in that fashion is inhumane.” Mzukisi Jam, of the South African National Civic Organisation, told *Al Jazeera* that while his organisation welcomed the court order, it was “disappointed” that the government had to be compelled to take action to save workers' lives.

Despite the court order, the police insist that healthy miners who resurface “will be processed and detained” while those who are sick will be “taken to hospital under police guard”—partial continuation of the blockade. Ominously, in an interview with *Al Jazeera*, police spokesperson Athlenda Mathe claimed to have information “that some of the illegal miners were heavily armed”—justifying possible police violence.

Three weeks ago, the police launched the operation to “smoke out” and arrest the miners at Stilfontein. Up to 4,000 miners may still be underground and there are fears their lives are at risk. The police had blocked the mine's entrance and stopped the supply of food and water to those inside as part of a broader “crackdown,” known as Operation Vala Umgodi that means “Close the Hole”, on illegal mining. This operation, made up of police officers and 3,000 troops, was launched in 2023 at the behest of companies such as Sibanye-Stillwater, the current owner of the Marikana platinum mine where 36 striking miners were massacred in 2012, against the backdrop of record gold prices.

The police have arrested more than 1,000 illegal miners, known as Zama Zamas (“take a chance”), at various mines in the area who had resurfaced due to the lack of food and water since the start of the blockade, charging them with criminal activities. Some were in a visibly weakened state. The decomposing body of one miner has

been removed, sparking fears that those who remain underground may be too weak to climb up to the surface.

On Wednesday, Khumbudzo Ntshavheni, a minister in Ramaphosa's office told a news conference that authorities would show no mercy. "We are not sending help to criminals," she said. "We are going to smoke them out. They will come out." "Criminals are not to be helped, they are to be persecuted [sic]" she added.

On Sunday, Ramaphosa told Parliament that he had extended the deployment of 1,100 troops in Operation Close the Hole for another six months at a cost of R140 million (\$7.8 million). He said he took a hard line against the miners because they were operating illegally and posed a risk to the economy, nearby communities and personal safety. He issued a statement saying, "The Stilfontein mine is a crime scene where the offense of illegal mining is being committed. It is standard police practice everywhere to secure a crime scene and to block off escape routes that enable criminals to evade arrest."

The stand-off in Stilfontein, one of South Africa's many dying mining towns where hunger is rampant, follows the arrest earlier this month of at least 565 illegal gold miners in nearby Orkney, after the police cut off their food and water supplies to force them to surface.

The police described their strategy as an "act of stamping the authority of the state". Police spokesperson Athlenda Mathe denied using the same tactic in Stilfontein. She dismissed the claims of 4,000 miners still trapped underground as a gross "exaggeration" and declared that no police officer, soldier or government official would go down the mine to rescue the miners, claiming, "There is a high risk of loss of life" since they may be heavily armed.

Mining for diamonds, coal, iron, gold, silver, titanium, vanadium and other minerals has for more than 150 years been the backbone of the economy, employing not just South African workers but up to 500,000 migrant workers. They could be subjected to even more exploitative conditions with the result that wages fell in real terms, according to numerous historians, providing ample returns for the mine owners. With the ending of apartheid, the former Bantustans, Lesotho and Mozambique provided 60 percent of the mining work force between 1989 to 1996.

Today, South Africa's mining industry employs less than 500,000 workers in the 60 million-strong country. Around 6,000 mines have closed since the apartheid era due to increased mechanisation, deteriorating infrastructure, notably electricity and transport, and the

rampant corruption and economic mismanagement orchestrated by the ANC that has enriched a tiny layer under its Black Economic Empowerment programme. Once the world's top gold producer, producing 619,000 kgs in 1993, by 2023, South Africa had fallen to 11th place, producing just 100,000 kgs, an increase on the previous year when production fell to 88,883 kgs. It now employs just 93,000 workers.

As poverty has soared, thousands of Zama Zamas, many of them undocumented migrants from Lesotho and Mozambique, have taken over the abandoned mines without legal permits, working in the most treacherous and precarious conditions to extract the gold that remains. They sell whatever they can scavenge on the black market, with the gold ultimately ending up in Dubai.

The Minerals Council of South Africa claim that artisanal mining has spawned a global network of criminal syndicates, often employing armed gangs and fighting both the police and rival gangs, and created a secondary market in local communities for food, alcohol and sex-work. It estimates that the mining industry is spending 2.5 billion rand (\$144 million) a year on security measures, much of it aimed at curtailing the Zama Zamas' activities. According to the government, the country loses about 70 billion rand (\$3.9 billion) a year to illegal mining.

The lack of jobs in the country's mining industry has had ramifications throughout southern Africa that once sent 500,000 migrant workers to South Africa. That number has now dwindled to just 35,000, with remittances to landlocked Lesotho falling to just 21 percent of GDP from 236 percent in 1987.

The police say they have recovered 369 firearms, 10,000 rounds of ammunition, 5 million rand (\$275,000) in cash and 32 million rand (\$1.75 million) worth of uncut diamonds from illegal miners since the Operation Close the Hole began. It has also led to the recovery of uncut diamonds, more than 5 million rand in cash and unlicensed weapons.



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