

Over 100 miners starved to death by the ANC in South Africa, hundreds still in danger

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Over 100 *zama zama* (“take a chance”) self-employed miners have been starved and dehydrated to death in a gold mine by the African National Congress (ANC) government of South Africa, led by President Cyril Ramaphosa.

Three dozen bodies have already been brought to the surface since Friday and videos taken underground show many more yet to be retrieved. The hundreds of survivors still in the mine are in an appalling, sick and emaciated condition.

One of the videos circulating online, released by the Mining Affected Communities United in Action (MACUA) group, shows dozens of corpses wrapped in makeshift body bags and records a man saying, “This is hunger. People are dying because of hunger. Please help us. Bring us food or take us out.”

A man in another video explains, “We’re starting to show you the bodies of those who died underground. And this is not all of them... Do you see how people are struggling? Please we need help.”

This is the deliberate outcome of the ANC’s policy. In a statement released this week, the General Industries Workers of South Africa union commented alongside community groups: “What has transpired here has to be called what it is: this is a Stilfontein massacre.”

The Ramaphosa government blockaded the mine—being worked without a permit by desperate unemployed South Africans and migrants from neighbouring countries—as part of its Operation *Vala Umgodi* (Plug the Hole), launched in 2023, involving 3,000 soldiers and police officers nationally. Supplies of food and water apparently started being intercepted as early as August last year.

Cabinet Minister Khumbudzo Ntshavheni told reporters in November: “We are not sending help to

criminals. We are going to smoke them out. They will come out. We are not sending help to criminals. Criminals are not to be helped; criminals are to be persecuted.” The informal mine workers were trapped between the threats of arrest—with 1,000 seized already, according to the government—and starvation.

In reality, many lacked even that choice. After police removed a winch and pulley system that was the main method used to enter a 2.5-kilometre-deep shaft, miners too weak to make a days’ long and treacherous journey to a different route out were effectively condemned to a torturous death in the dark.

MACUA took the government to court, which issued an order in December that food, water and medicine be allowed into the mine, but deliveries were totally inadequate.

Clement Moeletsi, a miner who escaped and was arrested in mid-December, submitted an affidavit in support of MACUA’s case. The Africa Report has published excerpts: “In July 2024, I made the difficult decision to descend 2km underground, driven by financial hardship and the need to provide for my family. Despite my best efforts, I was unable to secure employment, leaving me without the means to support my household.”

By September, he said, people were eating cockroaches and mixing salt with toothpaste for food. “I resorted to drinking underground water, which had a strong chemical taste,” he said, leading to headaches and abdominal pain.

Miners, he explained, “huddled in silence, too weak to speak or cry out. Others were delirious, mumbling incoherently or calling out for loved ones they would never see again.” Their starvation was “a cruel, drawn-out death”. Moeletsi and two other arrested miners say some resorted to cannibalism of the dead bodies.

In letters which have reached the surface, miners have asked for masks for the smell and bleach to get rid of the maggots.

A half-hearted official rescue operation is now underway, using a cage lowered into the main shaft which can fit fewer than 10 people. No official rescue crew will enter the main; the operation is being handled by a volunteer.

In the best case, it will take weeks to remove the miners. Since the mine is a deep maze of tunnels, with different groups of workers in different areas—and in poor health—many will never get close to the chance of rescue and die where they are. It is clearly the government's intention that as many as possible do so.

Ramaphosa, a former head of the National Union of Mineworkers turned multimillionaire, has made his views clear repeatedly in the last five months. In his New Year's speech he celebrated, "This has been a year in which we have intensified the fight against crime... our law enforcement agencies are decisively dealing with organised crime, illegal mining".

He told the 113th anniversary meeting of the ANC a few days ago, with the awful stories of miners' experiences in Stilfontein circulating widely in the press that the government's law-and-order campaign had been "bolstered by initiatives such as... Operation *Vala Umgodi* which is dealing decisively with illegal mining activities."

This is a revolting crime of South African capitalism. Comparisons are already being drawn in the country to the Marikana Massacre of 2012, where police under the command of the ANC killed 36 striking workers at the Lonmin platinum mine, and injured 78—the most lethal use of force by a South African government since the Soweto Uprising of 1976.

The miners then were taking wildcat action to demand a wage increase, under conditions in which they were being paid less than \$500 a month for living in squalid communal huts and working in hazardous, back-breaking conditions, to help make UK-based Lonmin its millions in profit.

Stilfontein shows the situation today is even worse. In 2012, the unemployment in South Africa was 24.5 percent; it is now 32.1 percent. Poverty is up from 55 to 63 percent.

Mining in particular has been in terminal decline, destroying any trace of economic stability in swathes of

the country. Not even able to find employment for pitifully low wages, an estimated 30,000 *zama zama* miners are forced to work illegally—generally in stints of six months underground—to have any chance of supporting their families.

The capitalist class of South Africa views these workers as surplus to requirements, unworthy of life. Currently unable to turn a profit out of the country's abandoned mineral wealth, they have entrusted its defence in the meantime to the ANC, hoping they can return one day with their own criminally exploited workforces.

Ramaphosa's ANC is already in electoral freefall, slumping to 40 percent in the 2024 election, from a previous record-low 57 percent in 2019. The *World Socialist Web Site* commented on the result:

Driving the disaffection with the ANC has been the party's failure to improve living conditions for all but the country's new black corporate elite under its Black Economic Empowerment policy. Key infrastructure and industries such as electricity and transport were broken up and sold to leading members and supporters of the ANC at rock bottom prices, leading to massive inefficiencies, grotesque levels of corruption and soaring inequality, making South Africa the most unequal country on the planet, according to the World Bank...

The ANC's electoral collapse and the political crisis it has exacerbated express the inability of the national bourgeoisie to improve the social conditions of the working class and rural poor.

The starvation at Stilfontein is graphic proof of this fact, and of the need for a socialist revolutionary party of the working class and rural poor.



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