

The Story of Illegal Mining is Much Deeper Zama zamas!

By Karibu Staff

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The Stilfontein Mine, located in North West Province, has been at the centre of a developing humanitarian crisis. The mine, once a thriving and busy gold mine, has been closed for many years. Despite its rich history and past success, the closure of Stilfontein has led to many problems that continue to affect the local community.

Recently, the abandoned Stilfontein Mine has been taken over by unknown people secretly controlling operations. These people employ desperate people, including children as young as 14. These workers, including South Africans and migrants, are exploited and made to dig for gold in the old tunnels. Despite the obvious dangers these workers face, they are forced to risk their lives every day in search of gold. This mine has become a sad example of how those in power exploit and take advantage of people.

For generations, black people from around South Africa and beyond came to work in mines like Stilfontein, in search of a better life. They worked hard, deep underground, mining valuable resources. Despite their hard work, they were paid very little, and their lives remained difficult.

In many mining towns, the big corporations that owned mines there made huge profits but didn't share the wealth with the communities. The benefits of workers' labour were enjoyed by capitalists. When the mines eventually closed, the corporations packed up and left workers and the communities struggling to survive.

Some of the mining companies do not fully rehabilitate the environment when the mine reaches the end of its lifespan. The Centre for Environmental Rights (CER) noted the dire situation for mining towns in its latest disclosure report:

"The information disclosed by mining companies, about the costs of rehabilitation of the environmental damage that they cause, and about the money that they are obliged to set aside to fix it, is inconsistent, unclear, in some cases unreliable, and not comparable between companies. It is therefore impossible for shareholders or taxpayers to hold companies or regulators to account."

The story of Stilfontein mine is a painful reminder of these facts. Today, the community of Stilfontein is still reeling from the effects. With few job opportunities and poverty, many community members are forced to risk their lives by going into the abandoned mineshafts in search of livelihood-making 'gold scraps'. Despite the involvement of the precious metal, it's a devastating cycle of poverty and desperation.

The government's response to the crisis at Stilfontein mine has been disappointing. Rather than address the underlying issues driving illegal mining in the country, Government has resorted to threatening poor people, *desperately* trying to make ends meet in a country troubled by high unemployment. The operation "Vala Mgodini" which is a South African government operation that is aimed at combating illegal mining activities. In Stilfontein, in a bid to force the so called zamazamas out, it

moved to cut off the food supply and vital aid, endangering the lives of those underground.

This approach by the state is alarming. Minister in the Presidency Khumbudzo Ntshavheni made a shocking statement saying, "We will smoke them out," which showed a lack of empathy and understanding of the serious issues that people are facing. By prioritising punishment over people, the government is not only failing to resolve the crisis but also putting lives at risk. A thorough and fair investigation is urgently needed to uncover the truth about the illegal mining operations at Stilfontein. Such an operation must bring those responsible to justice, not just regular workers but the syndicates behind it all.

The powerful behind the illegal operation are reaping big profits from illicit gold while leaving workers to face life-threatening conditions. Many miners were allegedly deceived into joining the operation, they went to Stilfontein believing they had secured legitimate employment. Instead, they found themselves entangled in illicit operations. The situation is further complicated by the presence of child workers.

The surfacing of child workers, with one being as young as 14 years old, is a shocking revelation that exposes the ugly truth about illegal mining in South Africa. It's unacceptable that children are being forced to work in these death traps. Illegal mining syndicates are willing to put children's lives in danger and disregard human rights, child labour laws, and basic human decency. This is not just a violation of children's rights; it's a crime against humanity.

It's estimated that around 4,000 people were underground in Stilfontein when government clampdown against this illegal operation started. The swollen number of zama zamas suggests this is a profitable trade, with big money changing hands. But who's buying the gold from these illicit operations? It can only be persons and organisations with big money, not just anyone. Those are who must be punished. Simply blaming the miners overlooks the real masterminds behind these operations and will not solve the real problem at hand, the real perpetrators need to be brought to justice.

We need law enforcement to take immediate action to address the root causes of illegal mining and to bring those responsible to justice.

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