

Swiss Company accused of poisoning workers in South Africa

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Four of the 120 workers fired from the South African operations of the transnational mining corporation Xstrata because they were ill, have died of vanadium poisoning. They fell ill while processing chemicals at the company's subsidiary Vanadium Technologies (Vantech) plant in Steelpoort, Mpumalanga.

Simon Taba, William Mpaketsane, Johannes Moima and Titus Letageng were fighting for compensation when they died of chronic renal failure and pneumonia or respiratory failure. Independent medical investigators have confirmed that the 120 workers were dismissed on medical grounds between January 1995 and September 1998, after they developed severe chemical bronchitis, bronchial hyperactivity, irritant-induced asthma, and sensorial peripheral neuropathy.

The National Union of Mineworkers (NUM), to which the workers belonged, has accused Xstrata of dismissing at least 120 ill workers without adequate compensation or medical assistance. The union says that Xstrata and Vantech have denied any access to annual medical reports and an in-depth medical risk assessment on the epidemic. Security guards escorted the NUM's attorney, Lawrence Mchunu, from Xstrata's Vantech plant in Steelpoort, despite permission having been granted for the records to be released to the union by the men's widows.

NUM senior attorney Richard Spoor said the American Journal of Industrial Medicine in 1999 confirmed that some workers were exposed to 50 times the maximum limit of vanadium pentoxide, sulphur dioxide and ammonia. Company statistics shown to researchers in October 1995 indicated that 33 percent of 1,033 reported complaints at the mine's clinic related to respiratory ailments. "What more proof do they want? Is this not enough?" asked Spoor. "Our team presented original signed medical release forms granting the

NUM the right to inspect the medical records. The widows all believe that their husbands died of vanadium poisoning and we have been asked to investigate the claims. But Lawrence and other union representatives were marched from the mine by security guards. This is despite Xstrata's public assurance that relevant medical records are open for inspection."

Vantech general manager Chris Smith refused to take media calls on the complaints, while both the South African and Swiss head offices of Xstrata refused to comment. Xstrata South Africa promised to refer the issue to its managing director, Wynand Meyjes, but he has also failed to comment. Vantech plant manager Herman Booysen said he was unaware of the incident.

Xstrata has failed to answer questions for the past four weeks on whether the corporation implemented the same safety standards in South Africa as was required in vanadium mines in Scandinavia and elsewhere in Europe. Swiss Embassy secretary Marcus Alexandra Antonietti would only say that the matter was "private".

The claims against Xstrata and Vantech, and the charge that Vantech has denied access to the annual medical reports and an in-depth medical risk assessment on the epidemic, became the subject of a debate in the South African parliament last month and a Mineral and Energy Affairs Department investigation was set up. Relatives and friends of the victims have established a community-based lobby group to demand proper compensation, better safety measures and full disclosure.

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