South African miners shot dead by security

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Mine security guards shot and killed two striking coal miners in KwaZulu-Natal on Wednesday, amid continuing tensions and clashes in South Africa's mining sector.

The latest killings took place at a mine near Dannhauser, about 125 miles south of Johannesburg. According to a local police commander, a confrontation unfolded after about 100 striking miners gathered at the coal mine's entrance. Mine security alleged that they then tried to force their way onto mine property and break into an armory there.

After driving the miners back, the security guards, employed by Forbes Coal, chased the strikers into a nearby shantytown, where they opened fire on the workers, fatally wounding two miners. They were taken to a hospital but died there, a police spokesman said.

The miners have been on strike since October 17, having originally demanded a 3,000 rand (US$345) raise on their monthly salary. The National Union of Mineworkers (NUM), which is aligned with South Africa's African National Congress (ANC) government, has sought to cut this demand in half in its negotiations with the mining company. Forbes, meanwhile, has offered just a 400 rand raise, or roughly US$45. Lower-paid miners receive just 3.800 rand, or US$437, a month.

In the wake of the shootings, Forbes announced that it is halting all operations at its Magdalena and Aviemore underground mines.

The killings will no doubt inflame the already bitter struggle that has pitted tens of thousands of miners across the country against the mining companies, the ANC government and the official miners' union, the NUM. Strikes, mass demonstrations and clashes with security forces have continued to spread since the August 16 police massacre of 34 striking Lonmin platinum miners at Marikana in South Africa's North West Province. This constituted the bloodiest act of repression since the end of the apartheid regime 18 years ago.

The largest recent confrontations have taken place at the Rustenburg mine owned by Anglo-American Platinum (AMPLATS), the world's largest platinum producer, also in North West Province.

Police have clashed repeatedly with miners after AMPLATS management and the official unions announced that the company had backed off its threat to fire 12,000 strikers and set a new Tuesday deadline for a return to work.

The move apparently came as a result of substantial pressure by the ANC government on the mining company, which offered 2,000 rand (US$230) one-time bonuses—described as "hardship allowances" for those who struck, and "loyalty allowances" for those who did not—but no wage increases.

The miners, who have been on strike since September 15, demanding a 16,000 rand monthly salary, reacted with anger to the back-to-work deal negotiated behind their backs by the official unions led by the NUM. Many said that the only way they knew about the agreement was through the media.

The Rustenburg Strike Co-ordinating Committee, which has opposed the NUM, announced that workers would not accept the return to work. "The strike is on," the committee's spokesman, Gadaffhi Madoda, said. "Workers have crushed the proposal to return to work."

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On Tuesday, police fired teargas, stun grenades, rubber bullets and live ammunition at thousands of striking miners who had barricaded the road to prevent police from coming into the mine. A police spokesman claimed that in the early morning hours, strikers had gone onto AMPLATS property and set fire to a power substation.

Later in the evening, the police attacked a meeting of thousands of strikers, dispersing the miners with rubber bullets and arresting at least 14. The police then pursued the workers into a nearby shanty settlement, where they burst into people's shacks and attacked them.

AMPLATS is the last of the major mining companies to confront a mass strike. Settlements and intimidation have ended walkouts in the South African gold mines as well as at Lonmin, where the initial confrontation led to the police massacre.

That may change, however, as Lonmin announced on Tuesday that it is preparing a major restructuring of its mining operations that would spell substantial layoffs. The company has decided to freeze platinum production at 750,000 ounces a year—instead of restoring it to 900,000 as originally planned—and to cut jobs accordingly.

Meanwhile, the continuing official inquiry into the Marikana massacre of last August was informed Wednesday that several miners have been arrested in recent weeks and subjected to brutal torture by the South African police.

Dali Mpofu, who is representing the 78 miners wounded by the police in the August 16 massacre, said that six miners had informed him of their ordeal after being released on Tuesday night.

"What is sad is since last night I've been listening to the most gory details of their assault and torture. One person said he was beaten up until he soiled himself. Another lost the hearing in his right ear, and another had visible scarring," Mpofu said.

Mpofu said that some of the miners he intended to call as key witnesses before the commission were among those arrested by the police, and that arrests had taken place after police had followed workers leaving the hearings of the Marikana Commission of Inquiry.

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