

Five killed, 22 feared trapped in South African mine explosion

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Five people were killed last Wednesday, and 22 others are trapped and feared dead after an explosion in a coal mine that has been closed in the South African province of Mpumalanga.

Since the explosion, mine rescue workers, who have not been paid since last October, have been unable to enter the mine because of high levels of methane and carbon monoxide gas.

The ventilation system has not been working, and the company has not yet repaired it. Those trapped are believed to be so far in the mine, that rescue workers could not reach them wearing portable oxygen tanks. Management has alleged that the rescue workers are refusing to enter in protest over having gone for months without wages.

Twenty people were able to escape the mine and reported that others were still trapped. One person who was injured was arrested for trespassing after he was released from the hospital.

The Gloria Coal Mine is run by a company owned by the Gupta brothers, South African capitalists with close ties to the ruling African National Congress, who are facing extensive corruption charges. The company has been in bankruptcy since early last year and was placed into receivership. Since then the mine has fallen into disrepair and production was stopped.

The business rescue representative for the mine, Mike Elliot, said that the ventilation system is down because thieves stole the wires supplying the large fans with power. But he has not said when that took place, why they weren't repaired or why they aren't being repaired now.

Elliot, the authorities and the media are in fact seeking to blame the victims for this disaster, referring to those who were killed and those still trapped as thieves who were in the mine to steal copper wiring.

Since the initial explosion, the English language media has almost stopped reporting on the disaster and the lack of any rescue attempts.

Elliot, and other company and government officials have not announced any plans for how they will rescue the trapped workers. No doubt the company and authorities see this as a deterrent to others who might try to enter the company's other abandoned mines in the area.

Miners who worked at the mine have not been paid since September 2018, and many report that they are not able to feed their families and themselves. Local residents have taken up food collections, including providing lunch once a week, but that is not enough.

Miners say that Elliot and the company are seeking to sell off mine assets to benefit the owners and creditors while leaving the workers with nothing.

It is not clear from media reports if the people trapped in the mine had also been miners who used to work there, but now without work, were forced to scavenge for scrap to feed their families. It is unlikely that anyone who had not worked there would have been able to find their way around so far underground, but many in the impoverished province are desperate.

In 2015, 55 percent of South Africa's population, or 30.4 million people, lived in poverty, and the number of people living in extreme poverty increased to 13.8 million from 11 million in 2011. Extreme poverty affects people living below the food poverty line, that is, those lacking the amount of money needed to buy only enough food to live on.

The food poverty line is set at just 441 South African rand per month per person. That amounts to less than \$32.00 a month at today's exchange rate. In 2012, Mpumalanga province recorded 1.5 million people living below the official poverty level of just 795 rand

for a family of four.

The Gupta mine disaster also further exposes the corrupt intersection between the ruling African National Congress (ANC), the unions and business magnates.

The Gupta brothers bought the Optimum Coal assets, which include the Gloria mine, in 2016. They are now in self-imposed exile, living in Dubai, facing arrest in South Africa for corruption. Charges against them involve many leaders of the ruling ANC, up to and including former President Jacob Zuma, who was forced to resign on February 14, 2018.

The Gupta brothers' ANC corruption scheme involved massive bribes and kickbacks to divert government funds and contracts to the Gupta family's businesses, much of it siphoned out of funds meant for South Africa's poor.

The corruption dates back to the very beginnings of the ANC's rule, as many of its leaders rushed to enrich themselves after the end of Apartheid. Prosecutors charge that the brothers would even pick candidates to be senators, who would in turn pass laws and regulations in their favor.

The Gupta businesses profited from vast exploitation of the workers, who were paid low wages and forced to work in unsafe conditions, while government and union officials looked the other way.

In 2012, the National Union of Mineworkers and police shot and killed over 40 striking platinum miners at the Lonmin mine in the town of Marikana in South Africa's North West province. Thirty-four miners were massacred by police firing assault rifles on August 16, 2012. Just days before, the strikers were fired upon by officials of the National Union of Mineworkers, when they marched to the local NUM headquarters to demand official support for their strike, which was overwhelmingly backed by the miners.

Then president Jacob Zuma and other ANC leaders approved of the murderous actions taken by the NUM leaders and the police. At the time of the massacre, Cyril Ramaphosa, the former general secretary of the NUM, was a director of Lonmin and used his state connections to press the government for a crackdown against the strikers. Ramaphosa, who became one of South Africa's richest men, succeeded Zuma as the country's president last year.

The killing of the Marikana miners marked a turning

point and an escalation in the attack against workers throughout the entire country.



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