

Dozens feared dead in mine collapse as pandemic-fueled social catastrophe wracks Zimbabwe

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Thirty informal miners were trapped after the November 25 collapse of the abandoned Ran gold mine in Bindura, some 70 km (43 miles) north of capital city Harare. Six were rescued alive a few hours after the collapse. Simultaneous with the collapse, ground water and mud flooded the shaft, brought by heavy rains the previous day that caused a mudslide.

Rescue efforts were suspended the next day after a generator failed to operate while pumping out water from the flooded 100-meter shaft. By the following day, another generator was located and brought to the site allowing for the effort to resume.

Christine Munyoro, a spokeswoman with the Zimbabwe Miners Federation (ZMF), an advocacy group of small-scale miners, told the *Guardian*, “On Thursday the rescue team tried to pump out the water but the generator failed. They started again today. The hardest thing is that the shaft is 100 metres deep. We also do not know what level they are at. They may be trapped in the mud.”

Government officials told the media that the mine had collapsed due to “blasting,” a method in which miners utilize dynamite to expose gold veins. In the Ran mine, officials declared that blasting had damaged several support pillars and facilitated the collapse.

The Ran mine tragedy follows a string of collapses of abandoned mines around the country, and comes only days after 10 informal miners were buried alive in the Premier Estates mine in eastern Zimbabwe, and early November’s Matshetshe mine collapse in Esigodini, a town in southern Zimbabwe, which buried six miners.

Last year, 24 informal miners were killed at the abandoned Silver Moon and Cricket Mines in Kadoma, after severe rains caused the collapse of a dam wall

nearby, resulting in massive flooding of the two gold mines.

The decommissioning of mines due to a lack of continuing profitability for Zimbabwe’s mining sector has led to the proliferation of abandoned mines around the country, in which common people, facing chronic joblessness, take up work mining these abandoned shafts, often selling what little gold they find for paltry sums.

Zimbabwe is home to rich deposits of gold, copper, and nickel, and miners employed in the country’s mining industry labor under extremely dangerous conditions for very low wages. The mining companies frequently bypass safety measures and forgo procuring proper protective equipment, risking miners’ health and lives in pursuit of profits.

In recent years, informal mining has attracted younger workers who need money while attending school. These youths are often exploited by buyers who often under-weigh the contents these youths bring for sale.

The tragedies of mine collapses take place amid an acute social catastrophe experienced by Zimbabweans, conditions that have worsened amid the COVID-19 pandemic.

Currently, there have been 9,822 confirmed COVID-19 infections in Zimbabwe, a country with a population of just under 15 million, since the pandemic began in March. As of November 29, 275 have died, a toll expected to rise in the coming weeks.

The intolerably desperate conditions facing the Zimbabwean masses, already present before pandemic, have been exacerbated by the pandemic and the response of the government of President Emmerson

Mnangagwa. In seeking to control the virus's spread last March, Mnangagwa imposed a lockdown without the accompaniment of funding for the population to weather the shutdown, leaving many Zimbabweans completely destitute.

The callous response of the ruling class to the deadly pandemic—which has led to skyrocketing unemployment, accompanied by shortages of medicine and food—is nothing short of a social crime.

As a measure of the desperate situation experienced by jobless workers since the onset of the pandemic, there has been an increase of jobless women drawn into sex work in the larger cities around the country, along with many teen-aged girls entering the trade.

Speaking to Reuters on the conditions that led her to become a sex worker, a young woman related her experience of losing her job in March as a waitress in Mutare, a city in eastern Zimbabwe on the border with Mozambique.

“Life was better until the advent of this coronavirus. Our business came to a standstill due to lockdown...unfortunately I was one of the people who were retrenched. ... I have two children. I could not watch them going to bed without eating anything.”

As part of the lockdown, accompanied by a strict curfew, the government also closed the borders of the country, which cut off the incomes of 1 million cross-border traders, a significant part of Zimbabwe's economy, which left a devastating impact on small shops, which have been permanently shuttered.

Hazel Zemura, a former sex worker employed by Women Against All Forms of Discrimination, which provides medical services for sex workers, told Reuters, “As our incomes, like the cross border trading—the importation of weaves and makeup kits from China for resale—got eroded during the lockdown, we had to turn to men for survival.”

Zimbabwe, a country of abundant economic resources, including vast mineral deposits in addition to gold, platinum and diamonds, is one of the most socially unequal on earth. The claim by the Mnangagwa government that there is no money to vastly improve the country's infrastructure, health care, education, or employment is a lie.

According to figures gathered by the World Inequality Database, the top 10 percent of Zimbabweans possess over half the nation's wealth,

with the bottom 50 percent holding just 12 percent. In a country that produces \$28 billion in GDP, 70 percent of the population lives in poverty.

The Mnangagwa government's refusal to provide any financial relief for the population during the pandemic follows the criminal policy adhered to by the ruling elites around the world, in which the health and lives of workers are sacrificed on behalf of the profit considerations of the wealthy aristocracy.



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