

After Langlaagte: DMR reveals the depth of illegal mining

The desperate plight of zama-zama (illegal) miners, who are willing to put their lives at risk in torrid conditions, to earn a living was once again highlighted with the drama that unfolded at Langlaagte earlier this month.

The incident has prompted the department of mineral resources (DMR) to highlight the progress they are making in dealing with illicit mining and creating a framework of inclusiveness for people looking to enter the mining industry.



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Rehabilitation

The department embarked on a research programme in 2000 to identify derelict and ownerless (D&O) mines to understand the scope of the problem, budget for rehabilitation and estimate the extent of liability. It developed the national strategy for management and rehabilitation of D&O mines in South Africa in 2009 to address the impact of environmental legacy of mining in an orderly manner.

To date the department has achieved the following:

- Rehabilitated 20 asbestos sites on behalf of the state.
- Sealed about 200 mine holings in Gauteng, Mpumalanga and Limpopo. This number is inclusive of Langlaagte West Deep shaft that was prioritised for rehabilitation ahead of other Langlaagte shafts since it is located within a settlement area and posed potential risk to members of the surrounding community.

Small-scale mining

It is now commonly accepted that small-scale and artisanal mining has enormous potential for absorbing greater numbers of people in productive employment in South Africa, and most of the countries on the continent for that matter. There are indications that the sector can be made to operate in an environmentally, friendly and sustainable way.

The process of strengthening the sector should use the integrated problem solving approach so that all the issues affecting and inhibiting the development of the sector are given due attention. The issues can be tackled under four broad categories, namely policy and legislation, institutions, support programme, research and development.

Within the DMR, there is a division dedicated to small-scale mining (SSM) promotion, specifically focused on surface mining - sand, aggregates, alluvial gold and alluvial diamond mining. The SSM division assists, those in need, in the permit application process. The regulation branch of the DMR either issue or decline the permits.

All the SSM projects in position of mining permits, market study documents and that make business sense have been assisted with the equipment through funding from IDC on behalf of the DMR. The efforts in small scale mining have a multiplier effect as the impact that the new businesses (SSM) will have on other service providers and the municipality in which it operates is great.

The division also holds regular SSM workshops thereby informing potential miners how to participate in the formal mining industry.

“We remain with a challenge of zama - zama operations in old derelict and ownerless gold mines that fall beyond the scope of the SSM division but the processes detailed above remain accessible to all who desire to participate in legal mining,” says a statement by the DMR.

Counter measures

The Gauteng Illegal Mining Stakeholder Forum (GIMSF) was established and some of the measures implemented to eradicate the illegal operations include:

- Promotion of legitimate mining
- Rehabilitation of derelict mines and sealing of holes
- Law enforcement and forensic analysis
- Policing and law enforcement
- Law enforcement training workshops on illegal mining

As a result of the increased illegal mining activities in Mpumalanga, Free State, Gauteng and Northern Cape provinces, the department made a presentation on the extent and impact of illegal mining to the justice Crime Prevention and Security (JCPS) Cabinet Committee.

After the presentation, the justice and crime prevention and security ministers directed that relevant departments be brought on board and this led to the establishment of the multi-agency National Co-ordination Strategic Management Team (NCSMT) in June 2010.

Furthermore, given the cross-cutting nature of the issues involved in illegal mining, the ministers mandated the NCSMT to develop a strategy to address the problems associated with illegal mining.

The NCSMT was established specifically to coordinate government's efforts to fight illegal mining and the trafficking of precious metals. Other objectives include bringing about successful prosecution of illegal mining cases, produce policy designed to lead to legislative reform, put in place a strategy to end the illicit trade in precious metals and to increase capacity to deal with illegal mining. The NCSMT meets once every month, facilitated by the DPCI and coordinated by NICOC.

Challenges

The illegal mining modus operandi is continuously changing as the department and relevant stakeholders implement measures ultimately to eradicate the illicit activities.

- In violent crime, including murder, as a result of rival gang activity fighting for diminishing opportunities., as well as attacks on SAPS, DMR, CGS and mine officials.
- Continuous reopening of sealed holings and new holings by illegal miners.

Mine and surface infrastructure compromised as a result of mining of remnants and stability pillars

- Degradation of environment including water, soil and air pollution by processing in water streams and using mercury.
- Illegal immigration and border security.

Way forward

Support the National Coordination Strategic Management Team (NCSMT) initiatives including disruptive operations, strengthening of charges and sentencing of criminal syndicates.

The provincial stakeholder forums to continue implementing measures to eradicate illegal mining activities, which include:

- Continuing to collaborate with affected municipalities, land owners and mining companies with the rehabilitation of derelict mines and the sealing of open shafts and holings to prevent access to underground workings.
- Strengthening the legal provisions to criminalise this form of illegal mining activities.
- Investigating small refineries and jewellery shops and the validity of licences.
- Promoting legitimate mining and removal of exposed minerals where necessary including removing gravel and mine dumps.