

60 bodies recovered from abandoned South African gold mine

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Community members watch as Senzo Mchunu, South African police minister, inspects outside

the mineshaft where it is estimated that hundreds of illegal miners are believed to be hiding underground, after police cut off food and water as part of police operations against illegal miners, in Stilfontein, South Africa, November 15, 2024 . (Photo: Reuters)

Pretoria, January 16 (RHC)-- South African authorities have recovered 60 bodies from a disused gold mine in Stilfontein, following a blockade targeting illegal miners, as the police report 106 miners were rescued and arrested during the operation.

The rescue and recovery mission, involving a metal cage to retrieve survivors and bodies from over 2 kilometers underground, began on Monday, and is expected to continue for several days. The death toll, currently stands at 60, but is likely to rise further as an unknown number of men are still feared trapped.

Illegal miners -- known locally as "zama zamas" -- operate in abandoned mines left behind by a shrinking South African mining industry. They work without permits, often under hazardous conditions, to extract remnants of gold. Their activities have sparked criticism for allegedly fueling criminal networks and increasing crime in surrounding areas.

In late 2023, police launched an operation to crack down on the sector across South Africa's north-eastern mining belt, blocking essential supplies to force miners to the surface.

While the government defends the operation as necessary to curb illicit mining, it has faced backlash from human rights groups and locals, as reports said miners were cut off from food, water, and other supplies during the blockade which could cause starvation and dehydration.

The operation follows a court challenge by a civil society group and reports of dire conditions inside the mine. The tragedy has drawn attention to the perilous circumstances faced by illegal miners and the broader issues surrounding South Africa's abandoned mining sites.

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