

# Africa's tragic gold rush



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**W**rapped in rags and eating rats, young refugees are the labour force in a black-market gold rush in Mozambique's Chimanimani Mountains. Pouring a thimble-sized trickle of toxic mercury into a plastic bowl, Banga, a 13-year-old boy, uses his bare hands to mix the darting liquid with congealed mud and whispers a prayer that slivers of gold will appear.

In his flaking, discoloured, palms, the mercury looks harmless but, according to the World Health Organization, it attacks the nerves and can cause a range of neurological problems.

Behind Banga, many other Zimbabwean children stand

In the previous *Labour Bulletin* Michael Bourdillon argued that international standards governing child labour should be more flexible. In the light of his arguments we publish **Dan McDougall's** description of children mining gold in Mozambique.

waist-deep in misery, retching as they reach into a foul alluvial pit, tainted by sewage, in search of ore containing minuscule traces of gold.

These children are the early shift. As they plough wearily through the mud, some of the boys look west across the border to Zimbabwe – towards home, towards loved ones they have left behind.

The children, many of them orphans, have joined an army of persecuted Zimbabweans who crossed the Chimanimani mountain range that separates their country's vast Marange diamond fields from Mozambique to join the hunt for treasure in a new land.

In Marange, according to the refugees, the army rotates units in the diamond fields on a cycle of two or three months to give everyone a crack at supplementing their meagre military pay.

The *gwejas*, as the miners are known in Shona, are forced to work for the soldiers.

'We were *gweja* slaves in Marange, nothing more,' says Bokhozi. 'All of us have family members who have been tortured or killed. That is why so many of us have come here...'

'Scraping for survival in the dirt is better than being stabbed with

bayonets to do the same job.

The miners feel the impact of economic problems in the West keenly. The price of gold jumped 18% this year to a record high of £867 an ounce as investors seek protection from the uncertainties of fluctuations in currency and equity markets.

Chenzira, a boy of 12, sleeps on the ground next to where he digs.

His diet is what he and his fellow miners can find – roots, grass, thicket rats and field mice, which they braai.

'I came here with my family – my mother and my brothers. My father was killed at the Chiladzwa mine (in Zimbabwe). My mother went back and we stayed,' he says.

He spends most of each day in muddy water, pulling out gold ore. The number of fortune hunters from Zimbabwe has swelled to about 20 000.

The gold lies 7m to 8m deep, but we climbed into pits up to 24m deep, where nothing more than brittle branches prevent the walls from caving in. The agility and size of the children make them particularly useful workers in the shafts and galleries.

Each morning, the refugees bash the ore with hammers, then grind

the smaller pieces into a powder. The powder is added to a slurry of water and mercury to draw particles of gold together.

Children under ten are most susceptible to mercury poisoning because their brains are still developing. They suffer from headaches, memory loss, twitching eyelids and other neurological problems. Inhaling mercury vapour harms the lungs and causes coughing. Long-term exposure can harm kidneys. 'We struggle to breathe some days. My heart beats faster when I take a day off,' Banga says.

The United Nations Environment Programme estimates that 6 000 tonnes of mercury are released worldwide each year into the air, land, rivers, lakes and seas. Gold mining is the second-largest source of mercury pollution after burning fossil fuels, and in Mozambique the number of prospectors is rising.

Unfortunately for the Zimbabweans, a system has been put in place to ensure they cannot make their fortune.

Mozambicans who were growing bananas until recently, sign over their smallholdings in short-term leases. But in return for being allowed to dig, the Zimbabweans must turn over up to 70% of any gold they unearth.

Some alluvial sites are controlled increasingly by Mozambican policemen. Border troops have been known to raid miners' camps, beating the inhabitants and stealing their share of the proceeds.

The prospectors sell the gold flakes they find to Mozambican dealers for the equivalent of about R55 a gram. The dealers, in turn, collect R88 in Manica, from Lebanese and Israeli buyers who illegally export the gold. It is eventually refined in Switzerland, and ends up on the London market for up to R286 a gram. <sup>18</sup>

*Dan McDougall writes for The Sunday Times in London.*

# Wealth Games or Wealth Gains

## India's Commonwealth Games

The 2010 Commonwealth Games in Delhi, India were controversial because facilities had not been completed by the time teams began to arrive.

However **Luke Sinwell** writes that they were controversial for a lot more including incurring huge expenses for a country where 40% of the world's hungry live. He argues for the need to mobilise against the ideas underpinning such extravaganzas.

For South Africans, the 2010 World Cup is over. Critical analysts who formed part of an anti-capitalist critique especially concerning the misappropriation of funds are now witnessing the hang-over in the form of the ongoing service delivery protests as well as the 2010 public sector strike. However, the struggle against the bidding for sporting mega-events by 'developing' countries across the globe is far from over.

Delhi in India recently hosted the Commonwealth Games from 3 to 14 October 2010. While there was widespread support for the World Cup in South Africa, the Commonwealth Games have been the subject of far more apprehension by the public.

Serious questions have been raised in India and in the international media about whether the Commonwealth Games will paint a negative picture of India's reputation and deter tourists from visiting. The media criticised the Games, as did the ruling Indian National Congress.

For example, former Union Sports Minister and current Member of Parliament said that the state of people living in poverty opposite the stadiums will not change regardless of who attends the games. He claimed that holding a ten-day event costing nearly 400-billion rupees (R60-billion), 'reflects a misplaced sense of pride and distortion of national priorities'. The decision neglects any sense of social justice by privileging 'a spectacular Games' as promised by the prime minister