

Aurora — blighted lives

Who cares?

Aurora gold mine is a tale of terrible incompetence by black economic empowerment capitalists and government. But what is the impact of their lack of urgency and will?

Margaret Renn visited the mine over a period of time and spoke to both legal and illegal miners to find out.

Besides the incompetence of the supposed owners, the ineptitude of the liquidator and the hooligans employed by security, there are people whose lives depend on the Aurora mine at Grootvlei and their lives are slowly being destroyed.

People like Frasy Namanyana, Nelson, Elphus Mabinda, Alexandre Mucauque, even Zoleka and Mpho Kwena, deserve better.

Namanyana is the easy-going chair of the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) branch at Grootvlei. He started at the mine in 1996. His parents wanted him to go to college as he has matric but his uncle, close to him like a brother, persuaded them that the realities and discipline of work would knock some sense into the young school rebel.

'So I came here and started work as a general labourer,' Namanyana says, living with his uncle in the married quarters rather than with the other single men. He worked his way up as a plant operator and a re-liner and first as treasurer, then deputy secretary of the NUM branch until he was voted in as branch chair. He's still there because, he says, the captain can't

leave the sinking ship. He could go. A job waits at a platinum mine in Limpopo, closer to home and his parents, a better wage and, more to the point, a regular wage.

Instead of which he sits outside his house with his deputy Nelson, sorting out the provident fund repayments, in the married quarters of what is becoming a ghost town.

His house is neat, the front doorstep freshly polished. In front of the row of houses washing flaps in the wind, chickens peck at the grass, children climb the trees. But this is keeping up appearances. There is no running water, everyone depends on a standpipe. Namanyana has a bath he cannot wash in, a toilet that does not flush.

Around the site the roads are rutted, the buildings rusting, the grass overgrown, rubbish accumulates. The only effort to tidy things up at the site office came when the representatives of a Chinese company were expected last November.

For several days in September there was no electricity. Tea was still served, the water boiling on a pot over two bricks and a few sticks. Eskom had turned off the electricity because of a fire in a sub-

station, but the rumour was that it followed the non-payment of a bill.

Everyone looks for an explanation of every event in either the incompetence of the company or the liquidator or the disinterest or lack of will by the departments of Labour and Mines. It seems incredible that so many people and so much bureaucracy can work to so little effect.

NO MONEY, NO JOBS, STRIPPED MINE

The provident fund is just one example. The workers, when they were working, paid into their fund. Aurora deducted the contributions from the wages but never actually paid them to Rand Mutual. This could be described as criminal fraud, but no one investigates and for months nothing happens.

In a letter to the NUM written by lawyers on behalf of the liquidator in June 2010 the failure to make the payments 'is condemned in the strongest terms'. It takes another six months before, finally, in November, the miners got back what is already theirs.

Unpaid wages suffer the same fate. The miners stopped working in March 2010. They hadn't been paid for months and, before that,

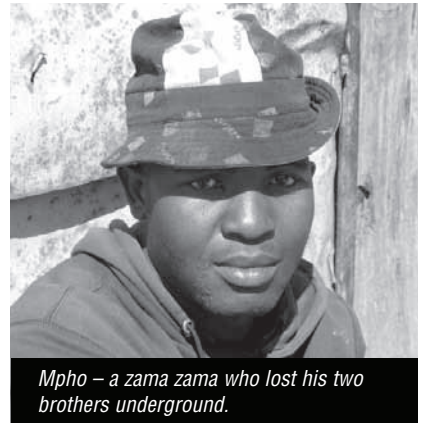
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Frasy – NUM branch chair.



Zoleka – wife of slain zama zama, now a zama zama herself.



Mpho – a zama zama who lost his two brothers underground.

hadn't been paid by Pamodzi Gold either. They are patient, the money slowly comes in, R50 one day, R100 another, tiny little sums paid out in dribs and drabs, often not enough to make a withdrawal from an ATM but always enough to incur bank charges.

The lack of money forced Alexandre Mucauque to bring his wife Beatrice and daughters to Grootvlei rather than visit them at home in Mozambique. He simply can't afford to go. This is a man who has worked for the mine for 27 years.

Mucauque arrived in 1982, turning his back on an already eventful career in law, banking and Frelimo. He wasn't fighting but he was training people to fire missiles and the war felt very close. A job in a gold mine seemed a safer option. He started out working for Gencor and then a string of companies

followed as the Aurora Grootvlei mine changed hands six times from the mid-1990s onwards.

Mucauque is now 55. His plan was to retire at 60. But that's now a hollow dream with nothing to retire from. He might get work elsewhere as he's a trained first-aid instructor and worked in the mine hospital until the company closed it down, but like many of the workers here he is still hoping his job will come back. Sitting round a camp fire while his wife boils water for tea is hardly a just reward for a lifetime labouring for a gold mine.

The number of jobs at Grootvlei has been declining for years. And more workers will go now that the provident cheques have been distributed. Harmony Gold came recruiting before Christmas but couldn't find enough skilled workers and just 18 got job offers.

The workers are going and the

assets are going too, despite the best efforts of the miners to protect what's left, to keep the mine intact and workable. They go out armed with whistles to stop thieves, but who is going to defend the property and who exactly is stripping what is not clear. Is it the *zama zamas* (illegal miners), the unpaid miners, security, the police, the company itself? Everyone has a story about illegal activity.

Namanyana tells me the 9 shaft has already been stripped by Aurora even though it doesn't own the assets as Pamodzi Resources, a separate company to Pamodzi Gold, which is not in liquidation, still owns those. And miners have been sent into the plant by the company to strip out the remaining gold, another questionable activity.

According to the miners, the Aurora owners never could make it work. They had no experience or expertise in mining. It was just a BEE (Black Economic Empowerment) company about which the miners have nothing good to say. Explains Elphus Mabinda, within weeks of taking over, gold production slumped from 200 kilos a week on two production runs to 30 kilos and just 7 kilos by the time the miners stopped working. He should know, he worked as a smelter. No gold. No wages.

'To run a mine you have to spend money first. It's not like mining a tuck shop with tins of fish and loaves of bread, a rand on every sale. You have to buy chemicals to smelt. Here they don't want any money to come out of their pockets,' says Namanyana in disgust.

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LIFE OF A ZAMA ZAMAS

The asset strippers who *do* hit the headlines are the *zama zamamas*. Shot at by security, rounded up by the police, they seem to be the only ones who can actually make a living out of Grootvlei.

Mpho Kwena was underground when the shooting at the illegal miners happened last August. He was surprised to see white faces and even more surprised as shots rang out. He ran. The ones who died were near the entrance, including his two brothers, Matteus and Kenneth Sithole.

Kwena is clear. 'I am a *zama zama*, not a miner. I come from Limpopo. There is no work there, or in Gauteng. I came here to work.'

He goes underground for two or three days at a time, sleeping where he works with his head on his knees, chiselling the gold out by hand, using a grinder to crush the rock, mercury and vinegar to extract the gold, until - he holds up his hands around an imaginary brick - he has enough to provide him with about R1 000 of gold once it has been further refined. He won't discuss the final stages or what happens to the gold, where it goes, who is selling it or how.

What he does is illegal. But shooting at him isn't legal either.

Zoleka Kwena is also trying to eke out a living. She's from the Eastern

Cape and she has no papers, no social grant, but until last August she had a family. On the day of the shooting she was in Johannesburg as her baby, Matteus' daughter, was sick and they went to hospital. By the time she came home in the evening her life was in pieces. It wasn't clear how she would survive. She didn't have the money to pay the mortuary to release his body, let alone pay for a funeral.

She holds up a photo - a young man poses in a World Cup t-shirt, looking straight at the camera with Everest township in Payneville, near Grootvlei, in the background. It was taken in July 2010. Less than a month later Matteus was dead.

All four bodies recovered were Mozambicans. There was, according to Kwena, a fifth body, recovered much later, already decomposing, and spirited back to Zimbabwe for burial. Who knows? Like everything about Aurora the stories never stop.

GHOST TOWN, GHOST MINE

Months ago, in June 2010, a firm of lawyers wrote to the NUM on behalf of the liquidators. They were 'working tirelessly'. They had been 'engaging literally every day' with the various stakeholders. 'No stone has been left unturned.' Two of the joint liquidators 'even flew to Germany' to meet with possible alternative funders.



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The liquidators are faced with this 'unfortunate reality', they wrote. 'Either continue with Aurora in the hope that funds will soon flow to it with which is may consummate (sic) the deal or remove Aurora from the mines and close same down and sell the assets off as scrap. The consequences of the latter is that significantly less value will be achieved... there will be no prospect of any employees of ongoing employment... this will have catastrophic consequences for the wider community on the East Rand.'

Grootvlei is like a ghost town. While the government talks about creating more jobs, the workforce at what was once a vibrant working mine has declined from 9 000 to 2 300, and most of those have now gone elsewhere. The ones who remain are old and unskilled, those who are owed most. Yet the miners say there is 60 years of gold left in this mine. Soon it will all be under water. ^{LB}

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