



Refugee Digest 91

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Migrants, Refugees and Displaced Persons

The very disturbing events in recent weeks at Stilfontein, around the contested issues of illegal mining and the various abuses that have emerged with regard to those activities, also have a very prominent 'migration thread' running through them. Indeed, this has been the case since the very start of the mining industry. The Leon Commission 1994, which looked into violence at three Goldfields mines, stated that "the Commission accepted that the mining industry was locked into the migrant labour system which gave it a control over the labour force". That pattern still exists; the events at Stilfontein confirm this.

These articles take a closer look at the intertwined history of mining and migrancy:

<https://www.frontiersin.org/journals/sustainable-cities/articles/10.3389/frsc.2023.1122193/full>

<https://tinyurl.com/4bkcb6a>

It is widely believed that most illegal miners, the 'zama zamas', are foreign nationals, probably undocumented, recruited largely from amongst the desperately poor, unemployed citizens of neighbouring countries.

<https://www.enca.com/videos/discussion-majority-stilfontein-zama-zamas-found-be-foreign-nationals>

<https://m.youtube.com/watch?v=sifls446VGA>

This link offers an example of the various nationalities involved in the Stilfontein mine. It underlines the regional spread of those 'recruited', mostly under false pretences and with untrue promises.

<https://www.ofm.co.za/article/centralsa/335292/second-group-of-stilfontein-zama-zamas-deported->

<https://www.rfi.fr/en/africa/20250117-south-african-union-calls-stilfontein-mine-siege-a-state-sponsored-massacre>

Some of the first illegal miners to emerge from the Stilfontein mine were charged with contravening the Immigration Act, thus underlining the presence of undocumented miners and a contemporary expression of the link between mining and migrant realities. It is noted that, of the approximately 2 000 illegal miners to emerge from Stilfontein, only 26 were South Africans.

<https://m.youtube.com/watch?v=sifls446VGA>

The South African Police Services at one point issued a press statement to correct misinformation which they said was prevalent in many circles and which misconstrued the situation, with serious consequences for all stakeholders. The statement also referred to foreign nationals.

<https://www.saps.gov.za/newsroom/msspeechdetail.php?nid=57796>

It has been noted that many in the area have found some means of survival by servicing the various needs of those in the mines, such as providing food and medicines and other necessities. This has had the effect of restoring some small measure of economic activity in places devastated by mine closures.

<https://www.news24.com/news24/southafrica/news/zamazamanomics-illegal-miners-bring-economic-benefits-but-also-terror-to-local-communities-20241116>

<https://www.moneyweb.co.za/moneyweb-opinion/columnists/spaza-shops-and-stilfontein-confronting-the-gaps-that-created-the-crises/>

In a country of knee-jerk reactions to foreign nationals in the form of very high levels of xenophobia, the presence of these workers, documented or undocumented, caused a xenophobic reaction, which was initially one of the strongest lines of attack.

<https://cer.org.za/news/press-release-statement-from-the-stilfontein-solidarity-committee-on-the-stilfontein-mining-crisis>

<https://www.csvr.org.za/unpacking-xenophobia-through-the-eyes-of-the-informal-miner/>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=31JttD4cjkU>

It is also deeply regrettable and reprehensible that some of these comments have come from members of Cabinet, not least because it gives such utterances a tone of acceptability and respectability.

<https://www.ewn.co.za/2024/11/30/mchunu-criticised-for-his-comments-on-locals-dating-foreign-nationals-in-stilfontein>

<https://accountabilitynow.org.za/letter-khumbudzo-ntshavheni-must-withdraw-remarks-on-illegal-miners/>

<https://sundayworld.co.za/news/stilfontein-residents-accuse-police-minister-ox-xenophobia/>

In literature probing some solutions to the myriad problems surrounding illegal mining and the tensions around the situation, it has been suggested that one way of dealing with vulnerable foreign nationals is to regularise their presence in mining areas through issuing seasonal mining permits. This proposal has met with some support. Alongside this there is also a call for the government to regularise artisanal, illegal mining.

<https://mg.co.za/thought-leader/opinion/2025-01-27-stilfontein-crisis-underlines-the-need-to-regulate-artisanal-mining/>

<https://www.healthandsafetyinternational.com/article/1896994/urgent-need-reform-illegal-miners-remain-trapped-stilfontein>

<https://fwdeklerk.org/the-stilfontein-mining-crisis-and-the-constitutional-dilemma/>

Running through several articles listed above is the steadfast call for respect for human rights. As part of that respect some have also called for the re-discovery of compassion and solidarity in situations such as these. The article below makes the salutary point that the mere fact of being undocumented is enough to dismiss people's dignity and to strip them of rights and care.

<https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/opinionista/2025-01-27-stilfontein-massacre-a-stark-reminder-of-south-africas-ongoing-struggle-with-human-rights-violations/>

The sad Stilfontein saga reveals many faultlines, ranging from patterns of acquisition and capitalist exploitation to the ruthless default position of xenophobia and careless comments and lack of care afforded to those affected by these realities, exacerbated by their irregular immigration status. Since over 6 000 of these abandoned mines exist, and with so many hundreds of thousands of people living in grinding poverty, this experience is likely to be replicated. We are obliged to find a way out of this quagmire. Small steps such as seasonal mining permits may well be the beginning of a solution.

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