



Press Statement

17 January 2025

Stilfontein – an indictment on our collective conscience

Defend our Democracy is deeply troubled by the wilful negligence that has resulted in *zama zama* miners starving to death at the Buffelsfontein Mine Shaft in Stilfontein in the North West Province.

We are left appalled and distressed by the images of dead and severely emaciated individuals being retrieved from Shaft 11 this week. 78 bodies were retrieved after a Court ordered rescue operation was initiated, and 246 other people were found alive, many of whom are in ill-health.

As rescue operations begin to wrap up, we need to collectively reflect as a country about why this matter was allowed to unfold as it did. Defend our Democracy supports the call for an inquiry into the matter.

The right to life, which is Constitutionally guaranteed, irrespective of a person's nationality or legal status, was violated. People – human beings – were left to starve to death 2km underground, with false information peddled that they 'could come up anytime they had wanted to', but were refusing to do so to avoid arrest.

While government has every right to counter illegal mining and make arrests, law and order must be effected within the prescripts of a human rights framework.

The state needs to accept ultimate responsibility for the violation of these human rights.

In the same vein, government must admit failure in addressing the broader systemic issues, including effectively regulating mines in relation to rehabilitation of disused shafts, immigration control, dismantling illegal mining gangs and exploitative networks, and addressing unemployment and poverty.

We commend Mining Affected Communities United in Action (Macua) for raising awareness about this crisis and for taking the matter, together with Lawyers for Human Rights (LHR) to Court. With the Stilfontein Solidarity Committee, they were, by and large, lone voices within broader civil society who consistently raised concern about the matter.

Defend our Democracy regrets its own silence and inability to offer support to these organisations, up until recently when more information and footage began to emerge of dozens of dead bodies lined up inside the mine.

In a meeting between Defend our Democracy's affiliates and Macua this week, civil society organisations were encouraged to participate in an upcoming summit being held by Macua, where Stilfontein, as well as some of the more systemic issues within the mining sector, are to be discussed.

The Stilfontein mine disaster is an indictment on our collective conscience as a country. It should never be allowed to happen again.



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