

Health, safety of mine workers in the spotlight

While South Africa is well known for its mineral wealth and a well-regulated mining industry that is a major contributor to the economy, the sector is grappling with the health and safety of miners.



Photo: Sibanye

In 2018 alone, a total of 69 mineworkers died while on duty, with the gold sector being a major contributor with 21 deaths. In 2017, the total number of miners who died on duty stood at 88.

Acknowledging that more can be done to correct this, the Health and Safety Council (MHSC) is hosting a two-day Occupational Health and Safety Summit in Benoni.

The summit brings together over 700 tripartite stakeholders from government, business and organised labour who are collectively assessing progress made in attaining the objective of “Every mineworker returning from work unharmed every day: Striving for zero harm”, and finding solutions that will assist the industry in improving the status quo.

Speaking at the event, Mineral Resources Minister Gwede Mantashe said there was an urgent need to pay attention to the health and safety of mineworkers and affected mining communities.

“It is important to ensure that workers work in safe places. If we have safe places, we will be productive. Safety in the mines is a collective responsibility of government, labour and business,” he said.

The industry must strive for zero-harm. “A worker must return from work unharmed every day. It is not necessary to lose a life in the industry. It is possible to mine without mineworkers being uncertain of whether they will return from work to their families.”

But for the industry to achieve this, it needs to pay attention to several contributing factors such as putting pressure on workers to meet production targets ahead of safety and uncertainty due to job cuts.

Although unavoidable, Mantashe said retrenchment announcements need to be managed as they create anxiety and sow seeds for mistakes and disasters.

“We must pay attention to the following - avoid putting pressure on workers pushing production targets, managers should not shout and threaten workers, managers should appreciate that this industry is about people and not just about minerals being mined.”

Chief Inspector of Mines David Msiza agreed that production should not be at the expense of mineworkers.

According to Statistics South Africa, the mining and quarrying industry increased by 4.9% and contributed a positive 0.4 percentage points to GDP, led by mining of metal ores including platinum group metals, copper and nickel.

Despite this, the minister said he was concerned that major mining companies are not investing in the South African economy and in the communities where they mine.

Going forward, mining companies need to ensure continuous education and training of workers on health and safety in addition to the communication chain.

“Workers are protected by the law to refuse to work in dangerous places. If owners don't educate their workers about that, unions must educate their members about that.”

The minister also spoke at length about the role ageing infrastructure play in the health and safety of workers. He called for the prioritisation of rehabilitation of equipment as a matter of urgency.

According to the MHSC progress report, a major contributor to mine deaths are falls of ground and rockbursts, general accidents and transportation-related accidents.

Health Minister Aaron Motsoaledi highlighted that the safety of workers needed to go beyond safety at work and include issues such as TB which is a common sickness among current and ex-mineworkers.

“TB kills more people than any other infectious diseases around the world but it remains ignored. It is a silent killer,” he said, adding that more mineworkers have died of TB than in any other sector.

The Department of Health has one-stop centres which provide health services to mining communities and it deploys mobile nurses and health inspectors to test mineworkers for occupational diseases regularly.

Over the past six months 7,060 workers and ex-workers were seen at the one-stop service centres demonstrating the need for such services in areas such as Mthatha, Carletonville, Burgersfort and Kuruman and other high TB infection rate areas such as Lejweleputswa in the Free State, West Rand in Gauteng, Sekhukhune and Waterberg in Limpopo and Bojanala and Dr Kenneth Kaunda in the North West.

The compensation of mine workers is a reactionary measure, Motsoaledi said. He said there should rather be a focus on preventing occupational diseases.

Government also has a Medical Bureau and Compensation Fund which has a functional electronic database of 600,000

claimant files and will add the 400,000 current workers in controlled mines and works to the database by 1 April 2019.

According to the minister, this electronic database assists with the certification of claims and payments for workers and ex-workers with occupational lung diseases.

“Since 2015, we have paid R600m to 20,000 claimants, of which R200m went to 6,000 claimants in neighbouring countries – this is a five-fold increase in payments compared to prior years.”

Chairperson of the Mineral Resources Portfolio Committee Sahlulele Luzipho said fatalities should be a measuring stick for mining executive bonuses instead of meeting production targets.

He called on mining companies not to hiding their challenges, which he said was a big challenge. “The committee is not there to only police but rather to work with you to find solutions to your challenges. So it is important not to hide them so that we can find solutions together,” said Luzipho.

The summit will continue tomorrow with feedback from the breakaway groups which are tackling issues such as falls of ground, leaving dangerous working places, fires and explosions as well as culture transformation.

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