

'MINING ACTIVISTS FACE DEATH THREATS'

Damning report highlights difficulties that communities face

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A damning new report published by Human Rights Watch has uncovered that not only were Xolobeni residents barred from protesting against proposed mining activities, but were also victimised and threatened with death.

The report, published on Tuesday, also fingers law enforcement agencies and municipalities as "imposing burdens" on protest organisers by placing legal hurdles in front of them before protests.

Human Rights Watch, environmental justice group groundWork, the Centre for Environmental Rights and Earthjustice all contributed to the report, which also makes numerous recommendations to the energy department, department of co-operative governance & traditional affairs and the Independent Police Investigative Directorate.

The report – which details threats and other forms of intimidation in mining-affected communities in Xolobeni, Kwa-Zulu-Natal, Limpopo and the North West – concludes that activism is under attack, especially in cases from mining-affected communities.

Australian company Mineral Commodities Ltd (MCL) started its perilous endeavour to mine the titanium-rich dunes of Xolobeni on the Wild Coast some 16 years ago.

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Researchers said MCL and/or directors or employees of other companies had active defamation lawsuits against eight activists and lawyers in relation to remarks made concerning mines, including Xolobeni.

The research also cites the 2016 killing of anti-mining activist Sikhosiphi "Bazooka" Rhadebe, who led the Amadiba Crisis Committee and community against titanium mining proposed by MCL.

The report describes a number of patterns to have emerged:

- Activists in mining-affected areas in the country live in fear and receive constant death threats, which are not taken seriously by police.

- At least four people have been killed for highlighting the negative impact mining has on the environment and a community's health.

- The researchers cited restrictive interpretation of laws and social media campaigns. These factors, the report says, had contributed to an atmosphere of fear for activists and communities facing the prospect of mining.

- The use of brutal force by police to crush protests.

Ramin Pejan, from the Earthjustice and co-author of the report, said he did not think that those who received threatening calls from private numbers knew how their numbers had been sourced.

The report says municipalities often "imposed burdens on organisers that have no legal basis, making protests difficult and sometimes impossible".

Researchers quote Nonhle

Mbuthuma, a leader of the Xolobeni community, as saying: "We are resisting mining activities in our community because it will lead to the displacement of households, devastation of our water supply and destroy opportunities for ecotourism and agriculture."

Amadiba Crisis Committee spokesperson Nonhle Mbuthuma said the organisation had seen the report, saying it was a "reflection of what's happening on the ground".

"The researchers engaged us before they presented the re-

port.

"People are dying for activism and there is no justice.

"We're going to have fewer activists globally because of the death rate," Mbuthuma added.

But Sifiso Ndovela, spokesperson for the pro-mining Xolobeni Youth For Sustainable Development, rubbished the report's claims that there had been threats against anti-mining activists.

He added there had been no underhand tactics and that all they wanted was development.

"We started this NPO [the pro-mining movement] because we wanted to see progress and currently there is none," said Ndovela.

Alfred Nzo municipality spokesperson Lubabalo Mafenge said he had not seen the report.

The municipality had not suppressed or had anything to do with activism in Xolobeni, he said.

He added the municipality had only "supported the engagement" processes in Xolobeni.