

Beat: Travel

Mine accident in South Africa kills 23 illegal miners

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USPA News - At least 23 illegal miners from Zimbabwe were killed last month in a mine accident near the South African city of Johannesburg, Zimbabwean officials said on Wednesday, reporting a death toll much higher than previously disclosed. Godfrey Magwenzi, Zimbabwe's Consul General in Johannesburg, said 23 Zimbabweans died at an abandoned mine in Roodeport, which is part of Johannesburg, on February 21 after inhaling high levels of carbon monoxide.

The South African government previously said only five people had died. "The South African police were at the mine throughout the operation to record the names of the deceased and take the bodies to a nearby government mortuary," the Consul General said, as quoted by the Zimbabwean newspaper The Herald. He said it took rescue workers 10 hours to bring the first two bodies to the surface. Rescue efforts were initially abandoned after the first bodies were recovered due to high levels of poisonous gas. Authorities also discovered that the tunnel used to enter the mine was too narrow, making it difficult for rescue teams to enter with their equipment. One survivor, identified as Solani Ndhlovu, said the miners had entered the abandoned mine on the afternoon of February 20 and worked through the night. "Ndhlovu said the miners encountered smoke with a pungent smell when they were returning to the surface which made them weak. He lost four colleagues who died on the spot while another man who was part of the group survived," Magwenzi said. The Zimbabwean government said it planned to begin repatriating 21 of the bodies on Thursday, including five bodies who were found without identification documents and their identities remain unknown. The bodies of the two other illegal miners killed in the accident have already been collected by relatives for burial. The Zimbabwe-owned company Kings and Queens Funeral Services offered to provide 21 coffins and handling services free of charge if the relatives of the victims paid 53,000 South African Rand (\$4,952) to transport the bodies to Zimbabwe. The relatives were able to raise only 23,000 South African Rand (\$2,148) while Lionshare, another Zimbabwe-owned company, paid the remaining balance. South Africa has a history of mining accidents, but the crisis-hit sector has also been hit by waves of strikes and high operating costs. The country's worst ever mine disaster occurred in January 1960 when a massive collapse occurred at a mine near the city of Vereeniging, killing at least 435 people.

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