

## **Harare Accused of Brutal Crackdown on Diamond Prospectors**

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Security forces said to have killed scores of people in an attempt to curb illegal mining.

Hanna Mabota, the young widow of Maxwell Mabota, still finds it hard to talk about the murder of her husband in November in the diamond fields of Chiadzwa.

A prominent Mutare businessman, Maxwell Mabota, 33, was accosted by soldiers, then kicked, punched and beaten with iron bars. He was accused of being part of a syndicate that was buying diamonds in Chiadzwa, about 80 kilometres northwest of Mutare in Zimbabwe's eastern Manicaland province, near the Mozambican border.

The governor of Zimbabwe's central bank, Gideon Gono, has estimated there are over 500 syndicates handling more than one billion US dollars a month in illegally mined diamonds that are swiftly smuggled out of the country.

After beating Mabota, the soldiers confiscated the 11,000 US dollars he was carrying and impounded his car and his two mobile phones. His widow does not know what became of them.

Mabota was dumped in the diamond fields and a policeman picked him up and rushed him to Mutare Central Hospital. He had a bleeding nose, his buttocks were ruptured, he had deep soft tissue injuries all over his body and his arms and legs were badly bruised.

Hanna found her husband close to death in a hospital with virtually no medicine and where all the staff were on strike. Hastily, the family arranged for Mabota to be airlifted to a private clinic in Johannesburg.

Two days later, he was pronounced dead.

"The whole family was devastated," Hanna said, adding that her husband had been looking after seven children at their family home.

Campaigners say Mabota is just one of hundreds of casualties of the brutal army-led crackdown on the diamond fields in Chiadzwa. The Zimbabwe Lawyers for Human Rights group, which has probed extra-judicial killings in the region, says security forces have shot and killed as many as 200 illegal diamond diggers since November.

The authorities, who have dubbed their security action Operation No Return, staunchly deny reports of rights abuses and extra-judicial killings in the diamond fields.

"No one was killed in the operation," Mining Minister Obert Mpofu, a senior member of President Robert Mugabe's ZANU-PF party, said. He claimed that a "high level of criminality" led to only three "murders" among diggers.

He said that Zimbabwe "is committed to the successful implementation of the Kimberley Process, and will provide information on the situation on the ground". Zimbabwe is a signatory to the Kimberley Process, a 2003 agreement by diamond-producing countries to prevent stones mined in conflict areas from entering the mainstream market.

However, human rights campaigners have documented cases of Zimbabwean air force helicopters sweeping over hundreds of fleeing illegal diamond miners and opening fire with machine guns. There have also been reports of security forces throwing teargas canisters into mine shafts to smoke people out.

The state-sanctioned crackdown on illegal miners is meant to assert government control over the lucrative diamond fields.

A De Beers subsidiary held the exploitation rights to the Chiadzwa diamond fields until 2006, but did not seek an extension because the diamonds in the area were deemed to be of poor quality.

The prospecting rights were then taken over by the British firm African Consolidated Resources. In late 2007, villagers around the area began discovering high-quality diamonds on the surface and the bankrupt Mugabe government hastily moved in, kicking out the British company and reclaiming the prospecting rights.

The state then ceded those rights to its quasi-government mining body, the Zimbabwe Mining Development Corporation, but the illegal diggers moved in so fast it was unable to assert control.

The government is then said to have resorted to brute force to keep away villagers and others looking to make a quick buck. Anyone with foreign currency was arrested on suspicion of dealing in stones – and cars, phones and other expensive possessions were confiscated unless the person could account for their wealth.

Main roads to and from the area are now guarded by military roadblocks with foreigners or those without adequate identification barred from entry. Anyone caught near the diamond fields without permission risks a beating or even death.

Amid the deadly violence, it emerged that there were large volumes of Zimbabwean diamonds from the Chiadzwa fields being smuggled to other countries in contravention of the Kimberley Process.

Human rights groups lobbied the World Diamond Council to probe the rights violations and the smuggling, saying Zimbabwe was compromising the legitimate international trade in Kimberley Process-certified diamonds. They said there was also clear evidence that Zimbabwe was no longer able to control a significant proportion of its diamond exports.

On March 16, a Kimberley Process team flew into Zimbabwe to investigate the claims. The following day, the fact-finding mission visited the Chiadzwa diamond fields.

A day later, the team met Zimbabwe's acting prime minister Thokozani Khupe and the deputy prime minister Arthur Mutambara (Prime Minister Morgan Tsvangirai is recuperating in neighbouring South Africa

after a road accident that injured him and killed his wife two weeks ago).

Namibia occupies the chair of the Kimberley Process Certification Scheme, KPCS, for 2009 and the team looking at the Zimbabwe situation was led by Namibian deputy minister of mines and energy, Bernard Esau, chairman of the KPCS for this year. Others on the team were Kennedy Hamutenya, the Namibian diamond commissioner; Cecillie Mbundu, the KPCS coordinator for Namibia; Vicky Dan, the KPCS liaison officer for Namibia; and Louis Sekelane, the CEO of South Africa's precious metals regulator.

The team is expected to report to the World Diamond Council amid heavy pressure to expel Zimbabwe.

"The [Kimberley Process] was designed to halt and prevent conflict diamonds through an international regulatory regime based on internal controls in each participating country," said a Zimbabwean rights campaigner. "The perpetration of human rights abuses and indiscriminate extra-judicial killing by governments in pursuit of Kimberley Process objectives is little better than the problem the scheme seeks to end. The Kimberley Process should act to condemn and prevent such violence in Zimbabwe."

Annie Dunnebacke, of the campaign group Global Witness, said, "We can no longer assume that Zimbabwe has the ability or the ethical standards needed to control its diamonds in ways that conform to the principles espoused by the Kimberley Process."

Members of the Kimberley Process Civil Society Coalition are calling on the Kimberley Process to suspend Zimbabwe from the certification scheme. They say a suspension of shipments will deprive legitimate producers in of immediate revenue, but will not stop them from mining and stockpiling diamonds against the day when Zimbabwe has been given a clean bill of health.

Chipso Sithole is a pseudonym of an IWPR-trained journalist in Zimbabwe.

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