

## MACUA & WAMUA - ADVICE OFFICE

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### **A Stilfontein Community Member Who Was Trapped Underground in Stilfontein, Speaks for the First Time: *"It Was Not an Illness that Killed Them. It Was Starvation"***

**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE | 03 January 2025**

Following recent developments relating to the destruction of the Community Rescue Operations pulley system, under the supervision of the South African Police Services (SAPS), and on the premises of Buffelsfontein Gold Mine, this meant that no further community rescue operations and food drops can be made. MACUA has had to supplement its application at the Constitutional Court to bring to the court's attention the escalation of the degree of urgency in the matter.

In the supplementary information provided to the court, we also included a more recent detailed account of the harrowing and desperate circumstances prevailing underground. The account of the horrendous conditions underground was provided by Clement Moeletsi and corroborated by other survivors who also recently surfaced.

Since Clement Moeletsi was retrieved from Shaft 11 by the dedicated actions of the Stilfontein Community Rescue Team on the 09<sup>th</sup> of December, the SAPS have resorted to a range of unconstitutional measures to deny him access to his legal representatives.

His legal representatives, Lawyers for Human Rights, and community members of the Stilfontein Crisis Committee, were sent from pillar to post, as the police bluntly refused to provide his legal representative access to him.

In an unexpected twist, the Pretoria North High Court also dismissed our application to ask the court to direct the SAPS to allow him access to his legal representative.

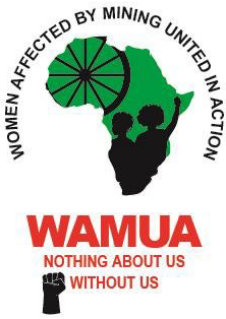
But despite all the cloak and dagger subterfuge, Clement Moeletsi was eventually released on R500 bail from the Stilfontein Magistrate courts on Tuesday the 31<sup>st</sup> of December 2024.

No sooner had Clement been granted bail than it became clear why SAPS was so desperate to keep him out of the public eye. What followed was a harrowing tale of unimaginable cruelty and human desperation, revealed through Clement's testimony.

His affidavit has been submitted as part of MACUA's appeal to the Constitutional Court. Clement Moeletsi speaks for the first time. His version is confirmed, under oath, by others who also recently surfaced.

In his own words:

*I was unable to give a more detailed account as my legal representatives were denied access to me while I was held at Hartbeespoort Police Station from 9 December 2024 until my release on 31 December 2024. This lack of access severely impeded my ability to communicate and provide critical information during that period. Now, having regained my freedom, I am in a position to offer a clear and detailed account of the events and conditions I experienced, which I believe will significantly assist the Court in understanding the urgency and gravity of the situation.*



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*As a result, on 24 July 2024, I entered Shaft 10 using the rope system. This system, operated manually by artisanal miners, required coordination and physical effort to lower individuals into the shaft.*

*Upon descending to level 6 of Shaft 10, I remained there for approximately one month before the impact of Operation Vala Umgodi was felt. During this time, I witnessed the daily struggles of those around me as we grappled with the harsh realities of life underground. The environment was suffocating and devoid of natural light, with the air thick and heavy.*

*Prior to the implementation of Operation Vala Umgodi, we relied on the support of other artisanal miners above ground and community members above ground to send food, medications, and other essential supplies. Families would provide these items, which were then delivered by miners on the surface to those trapped below. This system, while informal, was crucial in sustaining life underground.*

*In August 2024, the supply of food and other essential necessities for dignified living from above ground was completely cut off for Shaft 10. This abrupt termination of supplies left us utterly blindsided, as we had no warning or explanation for why the provision of food, water, medication, and other basic supplies had suddenly stopped.*

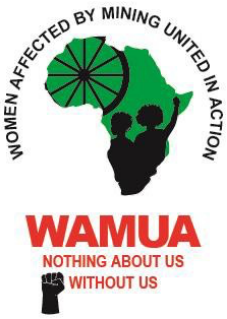
*Around September 2024, desperation for sustenance reached unimaginable levels. People began eating cockroaches and mixing toothpaste with salt to create makeshift meals, extreme measures born out of sheer deprivation. The lack of food and safe drinking water left us with no viable means of nourishment. From September through October 2024, the absence of even basic sustenance was absolute, and survival became a daily battle against starvation.*

*Personally, I went without food or potable water for nearly six weeks. The prolonged starvation left me physically and mentally drained, pushing my body to its limits. To survive, I resorted to drinking underground water, which had a strong chemical taste. While it kept me alive, it came at a cost, I suffered severe headaches, abdominal pain, and what I suspect were symptoms of stomach ulcers, brought on by the water's contamination.*

*Operation Vala Umgodi, implemented without warning by the South African Police Service, abruptly cut off any chance of aid or rescue. The impact was devastating. Starvation took hold swiftly, and I watched as those around me grew weaker by the day.*

*Their bodies wasted away, and their conditions deteriorated rapidly. Many succumbed to the unrelenting hunger, their skeletal frames haunting reminders of the horrors we endured. From what I witnessed; it was not illness but starvation that claimed the lives of those underground. These were preventable deaths, caused not by natural circumstances but by human decisions.*

*This is what I saw underground, people wasting away, their bodies betraying them in slow, agonising defeat. Hunger stripped them of their strength, turning once vibrant individuals into fragile shadows of themselves. At first, there were the pangs of hunger, sharp, and relentless. People held on, trying to ignore the gnawing emptiness inside them. Their faces*



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*grew thinner, their eyes sunken. As days turned to weeks without food, their movements became sluggish, as if every step was an unbearable effort.*

*The fat that once cushioned their frames disappeared, leaving their bones painfully visible beneath thinning skin. Faces hollowed out, and limbs looked impossibly frail. With nothing else to sustain them, their bodies started feeding on their own muscles. Arms that once could dig or carry now trembled under the weight of even the smallest task.*

*The air was heavy with sickness. Cuts and sores festered, unable to heal. Coughs rattled through the tunnels as people grew too weak to fight off what appeared to be infections. Skin cracked and broke open, leaving them vulnerable to infections they could no longer fend off.*

*Some, like me, drank the underground water to survive, but it brought its own torment causing searing stomach pain and unbearable headaches. The water burned their insides, yet we had no choice but to drink. I watched as hunger robbed people of their dignity. Some huddled in silence, too weak to speak or cry out. Others were delirious, mumbling incoherently or calling out for loved ones they would never see again.*

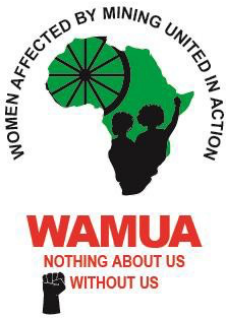
*Then came the final moments for some. Their breath grew shallow, their bodies still. They didn't die with any great commotion, just a quiet surrender, as if their bodies had finally given up. The hollow, lifeless look in their eyes was a constant reminder of what awaited the rest of us.*

*It was not an illness that killed them. It was starvation. A cruel, drawn-out death that consumed them piece by piece. This is what I saw underground. This is what we lived through, and this is why, respectfully, no one, despite what they have done, should ever endure such suffering again.*

*On 13 November 2024, news spread underground that food would be available at Shaft 11, sparking a wave of desperate hope among us. With no time to waste, we gathered what little strength we had left and ran, pushing our bodies beyond their limits in pursuit of sustenance. The journey was treacherous. Along the way, we encountered a section of the mine where the heat was almost unbearable, so intense that it was deemed unsafe to cross under normal circumstances. Yet, driven by the sheer will to survive, some of us managed to navigate this hellish passage, pushing onward until we reached Shaft 11.*

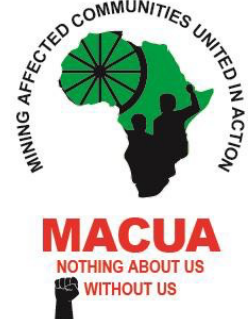
*Not everyone chose or was able to take the same path. Some, in their desperation to escape or reach the surface, turned to the ligaters, a single metal rod extending from the deepest part of the mine to the surface above. The rod, rusted and precarious, was never meant to serve as a means of escape. It resembled a thin, unsteady wardrobe pole, ill-suited for the weight and conditions it was subjected to. Despite the evident danger, many attempted the climb, driven by a hope that was stronger than their fear.*

*Tragically, the ligaters became a death trap. Most who tried to scale it fell, their weakened bodies unable to withstand the exertion or maintain their grip on the slippery, corroded surface. Those who fell plummeted to the very bottom of the mine, a place so remote and dangerous that recovery was nearly impossible without specialised equipment.*



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*Their remains were left at the base of the mine, a haunting reminder of the lengths people went to in their fight for survival. The sight of this rusted lifeline and the lives it claimed will forever remain etched in my memory.*

*The failure of the authorities to provide notice of Operation Vala Umgodi loomed over every death underground. This was not just a tragedy; it was a failure of duty. Had we known about the operation, we could have planned an evacuation or sought safety in time. Instead, we were left to fend for ourselves in a labyrinth of suffering and death. The lack of communication was not just negligent, it was inhumane, stripping us of our right to prepare for what was to come.*

*Those of us who survived did so not because we were stronger or more deserving but because of sheer luck. Every moment underground felt like a gamble, one we had not chosen to take but were forced into by the circumstances of our lives. What I witnessed in Shafts 10 and 11 will stay with me forever, a testament to the cruelty of neglect and the resilience of those who fought to survive despite impossible odds.*

The full account of the conditions on the trapped miners, in the words of Clement Moeletsi and others, can be read on the attached affidavits.

For media inquiries, contact the Head of Communication and Media at MACUA-WAMUA Advice Office, Magnificent Mndebele at 0647859746 or [Magnificent.Mndebele@macua.org.za](mailto:Magnificent.Mndebele@macua.org.za)