

Illicit gold trade fuels conflict in South African mining town

Authorities say 90 percent of murders in Durban Deep outside Johannesburg are linked to illegal gold mining.



Growing competition for gold in an area of rampant poverty and unemployment has sparked a deadly turf war [Shaun Swingler/Al Jazeera]

By Christopher Clark

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Johannesburg, South Africa – Making her rounds on a bright spring morning, Cora Bailey brakes sharply and points at a cross-breed dog with thick chestnut fur and a missing hind leg. “This is Snoopy,” Bailey says, as the dog, true to her name, snoops through a putrid mound of rubbish amidst the long grass that lines the roadside.

“She literally took a bullet to protect her owner. Unfortunately, we couldn’t save her leg,” Bailey says. “Even the dogs aren’t safe here.”

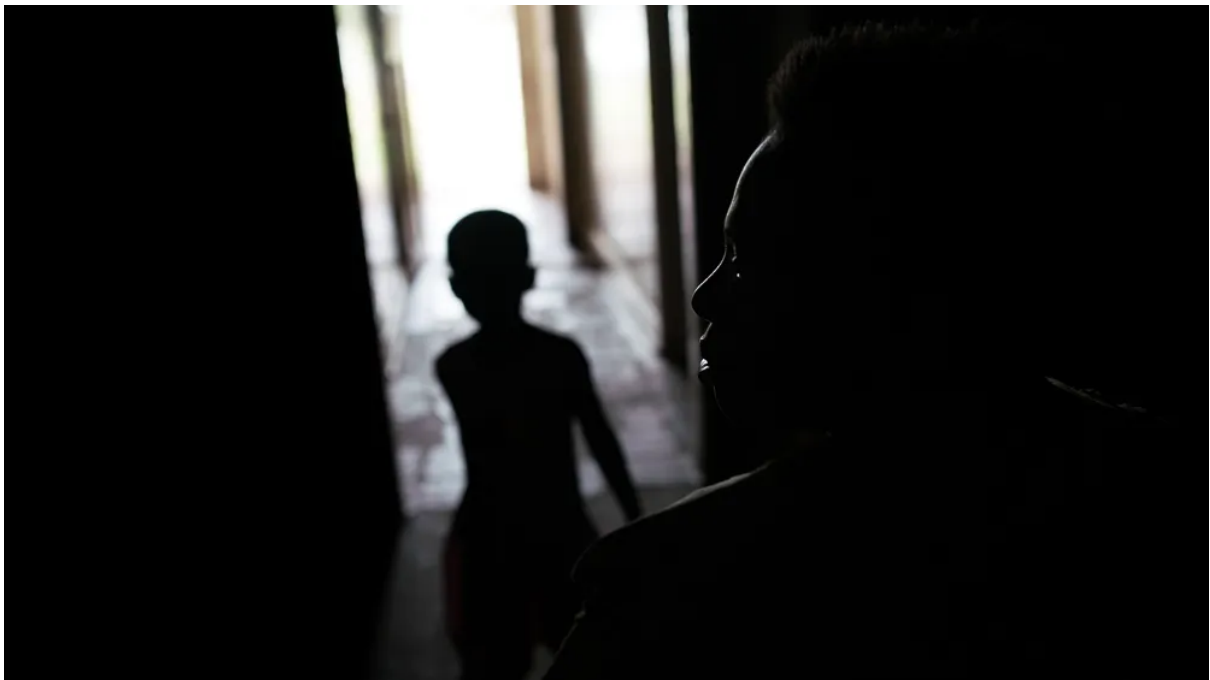
She sighs, lights a cigarette and drives on.

Fifteen years ago, Bailey, who has deep smile lines and a sharp sardonic wit, founded the CLAW animal welfare clinic here in Durban Deep, a defunct

Victorian-era gold mine on the western flank of Johannesburg, South Africa's famous "city of gold".

Today, Bailey's clinic continues to stand as an enduring place of sanctuary for animals like Snoopy, even as a bloody resources conflict has engulfed this forgotten mining town, often catching local residents in the crossfire.

"There have been so many dead bodies," Bailey told Al Jazeera. "I've lost count."



There are around 350 illegal miners in the Durban Deep area, according to the South African Human Rights Commissions [Shaun Swingler/Al Jazeera]

Formerly nicknamed the Grand Old Lady in mining circles, Durban Deep officially ceased its operations in 2001. But the 12-million ounces of gold still believed to be un-mined in the area have drawn thousands of low-income migrants, mostly from Zimbabwe and Lesotho. Many have moved into Durban Deep's abandoned bungalows on leafy streets once inhabited by wealthy white mine employees.

According to figures from 2011, the last time a nationwide census was done in South Africa, there were 744 people living within the former mine village itself, but the surrounding settlements of Matholesville and Sol Plaatje, both of which are largely sustained by illegal mining in the Durban Deep area, had populations of approximately 15,000 and 25,000 respectively. These populations are likely much higher today.

Throughout these settlements, vendors sit on street corners selling headlamps, balaclavas, knee pads and other essentials to the many young men who look to carve out a living underground.

But growing competition for gold in an area of rampant poverty and unemployment has sparked a deadly turf war. In the past few years, informal miners, colloquially known as zama zamas, which roughly translates from isiZulu as “take a chance”, have been murdered here by rival gangs and syndicates on an almost weekly basis, residents say.

According to Brigadier Sam Manala, station commander at Roodepoort Police Station, approximately 90 percent of murders in his precinct, which includes Durban Deep, are related to illegal mining. “This is one of the biggest problems that we are facing in this area,” Manala told Al Jazeera.

A 2015 report by the South African Human Rights Commission said that there are approximately 30,000 illegal miners operating across South Africa, with an estimated 350 of those mining in the Durban Deep area. Bailey believes the number today is much higher.

The report goes on to say that the rapid rise of zama zamas is a reflection of the widespread decline of the country’s formal mining industry; the failure of the African National Congress government to better regulate the informal mining sector; and the political and economic turmoil of neighbouring countries – an estimated 75 percent of zama zamas in the country are undocumented immigrants.

Deputy Mineral Resources Minister Godfrey Oliphant has said that about 10 percent of South Africa’s gold production, worth about R7 billion (\$565m), is taken out of the country each year through illicit mining, much of it from in and around Johannesburg. Since 2012, this highly lucrative industry has claimed the lives of more than 300 illegal miners in clashes over the control of mine shafts.

In Durban Deep, the scale of illegal mining and the resulting conflict has steadily intensified since the land was bought by Johannesburg developers Dino Properties in 2014. The change of ownership has cast uncertainty over the future of the approximately 800 residents who inhabit the mine’s crumbling former staff houses and hostels, cut off from even basic services.

Within the next five years, Dino plans to build approximately 18,000 affordable housing units as part of a broader government-backed project intended to help mitigate Johannesburg’s 800,000 housing unit shortage.



Many of the illegal miners come from neighbouring Lesotho and Zimbabwe [Shaun Swingler/Al Jazeera]

In a joint venture with Dino, Australian mining company West Wits Mining has been awarded a licence by the Department of Mineral Resources to resuscitate Durban Deep mine, claiming in 2016 that this will both improve security in the area and create up to 2,500 jobs. Neither West Wits nor the Department of Mineral Resources could be reached for further comment for this story.

According to Etienne Meyer, who is heading up the Dino development, the project is already having a positive impact on reducing illegal mining activities and associated violence in the area.

But Bailey dismisses Meyer's claims. "The industry is bigger than ever," she says, adding that "the community has been hearing about this supposed five-year plan for at least the last four years, but nothing's really changed so far".

As if to punctuate her point, Bailey rounds a corner and drives along a dirt track past groups of women busily crushing and grinding pieces of rock into fine gold-flecked sand. The women, their hands and clothes covered in white dust, look up warily as Bailey's car passes, then carry on with their work.

A little further along the road, apparent gold buyers load sacks full of the zama zamas' quarry into expensive cars before making their way back into the city. A police car crawls past the makeshift marketplace and then drives on without stopping.

David van Wyk, a mining researcher with the Johannesburg-based Bench Marks Foundation, says that these buyers, who are often connected to international

organised crime syndicates, are largely to blame for the escalating violence associated with illicit mining, and that zama zamas tend to be the victims rather than the villains.

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Manala, the brigadier, told Al Jazeera that he “cannot deny that there are some police officers that are corrupt, but our crime intelligence is working on that and we will deal with that accordingly”.

Hangwani Mulaudzi, spokesperson for the Hawks, a national directorate that targets organised crime and corruption, said his organisation was undertaking “an ongoing series of investigations” into illegal mining across South Africa, including alleged widespread police involvement in the industry.

But Bailey says there is little hope of restoring Durban Deep residents’ faith in the police. “No one ever seems to feel obliged to do any actual law enforcement whatsoever here and no crimes are ever solved,” she says.

According to Felicia Thisani, coordinator for a local volunteer group called Women as Safety Providers (WASP), women and children often bear the brunt of the lawlessness. “We deal with a lot of rape and abuse cases,” she says. “Sometimes it’s difficult to sleep at night thinking about all of these things.”

Sarah Crawford-Browne, a health science lecturer at the University of Cape Town who is writing her PhD on continuous trauma, says that in fractured, violent communities like Durban Deep “destructive energy generally gets channelled in a way that is going to affect those that are most vulnerable”.

“But the opposite side of that is that there’s also no protection and no policing, and therefore no accountability. So people are not having to control those violent impulses because there is no structure that they are pushing up against,” she added.

Since two female paramedics were attacked and one of them raped while attending to a burn victim in Durban Deep in 2010, ambulances also routinely refuse to respond to call-outs to the area, Bailey says.

Bailey and her staff at CLAW often end up filling the void. Among other things, they run an aftercare centre for local children and a women’s group. Bailey has also often been called on to intervene when groups of desperate residents have tried to take the law into their own hands by attacking suspected criminals. “There’s not much I haven’t seen here,” Bailey says.

Later in the day, Bailey pays a visit to Blessing*, a tall and softly-spoken Zimbabwean who came to South Africa in 2006. Blessing began illegally mining in Durban Deep in 2012, sometimes spending up to a week at a time underground, descending as far as 40 metres below the rocky surface. Sitting on an upturned paint bucket outside his shack in Sol Plaatje, he says that in a good month he could make R2,000 (about \$170) for his efforts.

In March 2017, Blessing was shot in the leg by a group of men who robbed him of his quarry when he came up from a few days underground. The assailants also shot dead one of his companions. Due to the enduring pain in his leg, Blessing has been unable to work since.

But despite the risks, as soon as his leg allows, Blessing says he’ll go back underground.

“Things are difficult. I have a child,” he says, motioning towards a three-year-old girl playing in the street behind him. “Sometimes we go hungry. Even though I am scared to go underground again, even though it’s not safe, I don’t have a choice.”

Blessing* is not his real name; it has been changed to protect his identity.

Source: *Al Jazeera*

<https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2018/5/1/illicit-gold-trade-fuels-conflict-in-south-african-mining-town>

Discussion Questions:

What are some tensions between development, economy and the environment?

What are some mitigating factors that can help achieve a balance?

In low-income countries, are natural resources a boon or a bane?