



17 August 2012

### **Press statement Bench Marks Foundation**

Yesterday the President of the SACC and Chairperson of the Bench Marks Foundation, Bishop Jo Seoka and a team, met with the striking Lonmin workers. He was told by the striking workers that they wanted management to talk to them.

The SACC team left to seek a meeting with management as requested by the leaders of the striking miners. On arrival they were welcomed and told that the briefing has just been done. Bishop Seoka met with management who informed him that they were not in a position to meet with the strikers because they were killing innocent people. However later they agreed to a meeting provided the workers committed to three conditions: surrender their weapons, elect a small representative group to engage with management and disperse from the mountain. Management later introduced the Bishop and his team to the Commanding Officer, Ms Mbombo, who briefly explained to them that two policemen were killed and that the strikers were given an ultimatum to surrender their weapons and disperse. On leaving the briefing area to report back to the miners, the SACC team was told they could not go back to the camp as the place was now a security risk area under the police. Bishop Seoka said they saw two helicopters taking off and assumed that they were going to the mountain where the workers were camping. 'As they left the area a call came through from the man we spoke to telling us that the police were killing them and we could hear the gun shots and screams of people', says the Bishop. 'The man covered with green blanket lying dead was the last person we spoke to who represented the mine workers.'

The Bench Marks Foundation's study, '*Living in the Platinum Mines Fields*' released on the 14<sup>th</sup> August 2012 paints a grim picture of mining and communities. The platinum mining companies appear on the surface to be socially responsible, respectful of communities and workers and contributing to host community development. 'Nothing can be further from the truth', says Bishop Seoka.

The Bench Marks Foundation study pointed out that the platinum mines rely on labour brokers and subcontractors that employ workers at very low wages. The use of migrant and subcontracted labour, the living-out allowance and the overcrowding of townships and squatter camps housing mine workers is a recipe for disaster. If the truth be told it is shareholders in London and elsewhere that are to blame. Profits are being made at the expense of workers and communities and with the help of political patronage. Mine companies put politically connected people on their board, such as director generals and former ministers, which leads to a breakdown of democracy, of government oversight, and of regulatory authorities' power.

Whose side is the government on? The vivid imagery of dead miners lying on the ground in front of heavily armed police evokes a painful resemblance to the role of the police in the apartheid era. Is it

not the role of the police to protect its own citizens? 'Why is the South African government, represented by the South African police force choosing to open fire on its own people, in order to protect a corporation?', asks Seoka. The lives of black mine workers are clearly not worth much in the eyes of Lonmin or the government. Unfortunately, recent events at the Lonmin mine are only the tip of the iceberg of the continuous exploitation by platinum mining houses of both mine workers and the surrounding mining communities.

What is happening at Lonmin is a horrific example that is symptomatic of a wider structural problem of exploitation by the mines. The benefits of mining are not reaching the workers or the surrounding communities. Lack of employment opportunities for local youth, squalid living conditions, unemployment and growing inequalities contribute to this mess.

The Bench Marks Foundation's study warned about deteriorating social relations in communities, conflicts and the potential for violent conflict. Now we witness the brutality of Lonmin not willing to meet their workers. The latest incidents had nothing to do with inter-union rivalry. Bishop Seoka, when speaking to the striking workers yesterday, noted that they were in fact peaceful and just wanted the company to engage them. 'But we have witnessed similar events around Impala Platinum when three workers lost their lives under similar conditions several months back', said Seoka.

Last May Lonmin fired 9000 workers in an unprotected industrial section. Recently they began retrenching workers. Low wages along with all the social disintegration, crime, murder, rape and prostitution, unemployment and poverty amidst the third richest platinum mine in the world, create an incubator ripe for huge worker and community discontent.

'What must be remembered is that about 10 days ago Lonmin security guards shot dead two demonstrating workers outside their gate. This situation could have been avoided. The killing of over 30 workers, and the quietness of Lonmin in all of this is truly shocking,' said Bishop Seoka.

The Bench Marks Foundation and the SACC calls for a high level commission of enquiry involving the churches and other independent organs to examine the situation of mine workers, their wages and living conditions and role of the companies in not effectively dealing with worker and community discontent when it has been boiling for months.

Bench Marks Foundation

Statement issued by John Capel Executive Director