Violent S. Africa Mine Protest Leads to Fatalities

JON GAMBRELL,Associated Press

MARIKANA, South Africa (AP) — Thousands of angry South African workers met Tuesday on a rocky cliff within sight of their platinum mine shuttered by violent protests, shouting demands for more pay over the roar of circling police and military helicopters.

As authorities pleaded for calm, the men trekked there from the simple hostels and shacks near the Lonmin PLC mine, carrying pipes, clubs and machetes across the barren fields with high-tension electrical wires overhead.

As the workers met, the body of a middle-aged man who had been bludgeoned to death was found about 100 meters (yards) away. Police were investigating the crime, but the man appeared to be the 10th person killed at the Lonmin mine in unrest that is gripping South Africa's mining industry.

The rage involves longtime struggles and low pay faced by miners in a nation whose economy depends on cheap labor pulling precious minerals from the ground. A struggle between two labor unions also has been blamed.

The unrest at the Lonmin mine began Friday, as some 3,000 workers walked off the job over pay in what management described as an illegal strike.

Those who tried to work Saturday were attacked, management and the National Union of Mineworkers said.

On Sunday, the rage became deadly as a crowd killed two security guards there by setting their car ablaze, authorities said.

By Monday, angry mobs killed two other workers and overpowered police, killing two officers, officials said. Officers opened fire, killing three others, police said.

Operations appeared to come to a standstill Tuesday as workers stayed away from the mines, where 96 percent of all Lonmin's platinum production comes from. The stoppage spooked those investing in Lonmin, the world's third largest platinum producer. Lonmin's shares fell by 4.94 percent Tuesday at the London Stock Exchange.

Barnard O. Mokwena, an executive vice president for Lonmin, said the company continued to meet with the police regarding the violence. "Until we know why 3,000 people are under this influence to kill ... people, it's hard for us to believe this is a genuine complaint about the rights of workers," Mokwena said.

While Friday's walkout appeared to be about wages, the ensuing violence has been fueled by the struggles between the dominant National Union of Mineworkers and the upstart Association of Mineworkers and Construction Union. Disputes between the two unions escalated into violence earlier this year at another mine.

Both unions have blamed each other for the killings and attacks at the mine at Marikana, about 70 kilometers (40 miles) northwest of Johannesburg.

Attempts by The Associated Press to reach members of the rival unions were unsuccessful Tuesday as some miners threatened journalists and beat on their cars with sticks, machetes and pipes. No journalists were harmed.

The striking miners gathered Tuesday at a rocky outcropping within sight of a processing facility at the Lonmin mine. They ordered visitors to remove their rings and hats and to turn off their mobile phones because they consider it a holy site.

Police mainly kept their distance from the meeting mine workers, though helicopters flew overhead. A contingent of soldiers in heavy bulletproof vests also stood by on armored trucks with heavy machine guns.

Capt. Dennis Adrio, a police spokesman, said: "Our objective is to civilize the situation on the ground. The second objective is to find who killed our two officers and those who killed the other dead."

Mining helped give birth to modern South Africa, as prospectors and later international companies rushed to areas around Johannesburg and elsewhere looking for gold, diamonds and other precious metals. Today, South Africa remains one of the world's dominant producers of platinum, gold and chromium.

But miners long have faced low salaries and poor working conditions. Apartheid kept black African workers from more lucrative jobs offered to whites. Though the nation became truly democratic in the 1990s, the salaries of black miners remain low.

As the protest continued Tuesday, a report released by an organization monitoring international mining corporations criticized Lonmin's operation at Marikana. The Bench Marks Foundation said Lonmin workers often live in deteriorating shacks without electricity, as workers' children suffer from chronic illnesses brought on by broken pipes spilling raw sewage.

Meanwhile, prostitution, alcoholism and other problems run rampant in the mining communities.

Mokwena, the Lonmin executive vice president, declined to comment about the report's allegations. However, he criticized the timing of the report's release,

saying: "It propels more violence unnecessarily."

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Associated Press writer Emoke Bebiak in Johannesburg contributed to this report.

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Jon Gambrell can be reached at www.twitter.com/jongambrellAP *[1] .*

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