Police Fire Gas at Striking Miners

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MARIKANA, South Africa (AP) — In a crackdown on striking miners condemned by the South African Council of Churches, police fired rubber bullets and tear gas that sent men, women and children scattering as officers herded them into their shacks.

Saturday's show of force follows a government vow to halt illegal protests and disarm strikers who have stopped work at one gold and six platinum mines, destabilizing the country's critical mining sector.

It was the first police action since officers killed 34 miners on Aug. 16 in state violence that shocked the nation.

It was not known how many people were hurt in the violence at the London-registered Lonmin platinum mine. Six women were hit by rubber bullets and one had to be hospitalized, Anglican Bishop Jo Seoka, president of the Council of Churches, reported in a furious statement.

He warned of serious repercussions and said he was holding the government and Lonmin PLC responsible.

"Government must be crazy believing that what to me resembles an apartheid-era crackdown can succeed," Seoka said. "We must not forget that such crackdowns in the past led to more resistance and government can ill afford to be seen as the enemy of the people that they put in power."

Seoka, who also is head of the Bench Marks Foundation that put out a damning report last month about miners' living and working conditions, said the strike had just cause and was not the work of instigators, as some have suggested.

"The problem will not go away even if this crackdown wins the present battle," he

said. "The 'war' between workers who do not receive just remuneration against the enormous amounts of money paid to executives will continue to fester."

Seoka said the government was destroying four weeks of mediation in which he has taken part. He called for minimal policing of strikers.

The strikers planned a march Sunday on the police station of the nearest town, Rustenburg, about 60 miles (100 kilometers) northwest of Johannesburg. Trucks carrying soldiers were seen driving to the area, indicating the army may also get involved.

Before dawn Saturday, about 500 officers raided hostels at the Lonmin PLC platinum mine and confiscated homemade machetes, spears, knives and clubs, said police spokesman Brig. Thulani Ngubane.

A half dozen men were arrested for illegal possession of arms and drugs in those raids, he said. Another six were arrested Saturday morning.

Officers first fired tear gas at hundreds of miners who refused to disarm at the hill of granite boulders that has become the strikers' headquarters.

Police then moved into the Wonderkop shantytown where residents set up barricades of burning tires to try to block the officers from their neighborhood. Police fired tear gas and rubber bullets at people who disobeyed orders baying over a bull horn for them to stay in their homes, tin shacks without electricity or running water divided by dirt tracks.

An army helicopter flew in to help herd people indoors.

Justice Minister Jeff Radebe called a news conference Friday to say the government was intervening because the mining industry is central to the economy of Africa's richest nation.

"The South African government has noted and is deeply concerned by the amount of violence, threats and intimidation that is currently taking place in our country," he said.

Lonmin said it believed that just 3,000 of its 28,000 employees and 10,000 contract miners were involved in the strike. It said the rest of the workforce was staying away because of threats from strikers who have said they will kill anyone who works.

Ten people were killed in the run-up to the police killings, including two police officers hacked to death by strikers, two mine security guards burned alive in their vehicles and six shop stewards of the dominant National Union of Mineworkers. Strikers accuse the NUM of being coopted by mine management and being too involved in business and politics to pay attention to basic shop-floor needs of its

members.

The trouble that began Aug. 10 at Lonmin PLC, the world's third largest platinum mine, is rooted in the rivalry between the NUM and a breakaway union.

Strikers have rejected a Lonmin offer to boost the entry-level monthly salary by 900 rand ($112.50) to about R5,500 ($688) with commensurate increases for higher paid workers. At government-brokered talks Friday, the company increased the offer to an additional R1,800 ($225) for the rock drill operators who began the strike. But that still falls far short of the strikers' demands for a minimum monthly wage of R12,500 ($1,560).

The strikers have said they would rather see Lonmin shut down the mine than accept a lower offer.

Finance Minister Pravin Gordhan said Friday that the strikes are "extremely damaging" to the economy.

"It undermines confidence in the South African economy and, if we undermine confidence, we undermine investment," he said.

Strikes are illegal in South Africa unless approved by the government labor conciliation board, which only allows stoppages once workers prove they have tried and failed to negotiate with an employer and after the conciliation board itself also tries to resolve the issue.

Faul reported from Johannesburg.

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