South Africa Starts Investigating Mine Violence

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JOHANNESBURG (AP) — An official inquiry into the killings of dozens of people near a South African platinum mine began Monday even as labor unrest continued with workers at other mines as well as truck drivers continuing protests over pay.

The National Union of Mineworkers said one of its officials was hospitalized in intensive care after a petrol-bomb attack on his house Friday night. The union said the victim is the union's top official at Anglo American Platinum's Khomanani branch and that the attack was carried out by people who are deliberately intimidating its members. The NUM did not elaborate, but a new union has purportedly been intimidating NUM leaders in its bid to gain more members and bargaining power. Workers have been on strike for weeks at Anglo American Platinum, the world's largest platinum producer.

Meanwhile the South African Transport and Allied Workers Union, or SATAWU, said it is organizing peaceful protests or meetings of its members across South Africa. Truck drivers have been on strike over pay for a week.

The inquiry launched Monday focuses on violence at a Lonmin PLC platinum mine northwest of Johannesburg. On Aug. 16 police opened fire on demonstrating strikers, killing 34 and wounding 78. Around a dozen people died on other days at Marikana. The Marikana commission of inquiry, chaired by retired Judge Ian Farlam, will determine the roles played by the police, Lonmin, the NUM and the Association of Mineworkers and Construction Union. It will also determine whether any of those investigated could have put measures into place to prevent the violence.

"It is very important the truth of what happened should become clear as soon as possible," Farlam said Monday morning at the Civic Center in Rustenburg, where hearings began before a planned visit to the Marikana site. "Our country weeps for this unnecessary and tragic loss of life."

The commission read the names of the dead and asked that any family present stand, but none did and apparently none was present. Families of many of the miners live far away, in the Eastern Cape, Swaziland and Lesotho. Dumisa Ntsebeza, advocate for the families of those who died, said some didn't know an official inquiry was happening.

Public hearings will begin Wednesday, with families of the dead given priority seating.

"It is vital that it is empowered, properly resourced and given the time to do everything necessary to uncover exactly what happened in Marikana and help ensure these horrific events are not repeated," Amnesty International Southern Africa director Noel Kututwa said in a statement last week.

The nearly six-week strike at Marikana was resolved with a wage deal that saw miners gain a 22 percent pay rise and return to work Sept. 20. The strikes, however, have spread to other platinum and gold mines in the region and workers are increasingly rejecting their own unions and choosing their own representatives to speak directly with management.

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