

SK Newsletter 15.1

Bontekoe –

The unfinished business of De Beers Diamond Mining Company et al, in Namaqualand.

September 2016.

In August 2012 I sent you SK Newsletter 15 which dealt with the mining disaster at Bontekoe, near Komaggas in the Northern Cape. Ten men lost their lives while digging 'illegally' for diamonds.

To recap: Prior to 1920 the coastal strip from the Gariep (Orange River) down to the Spoeg Rivier and beyond was the winter pasture for the cattle, goats and sheep of different Khoi, and those later referred to as Coloured communities. The adjacent hinterland provided pasture in summer. The essence of animal husbandry in this semi-desert depended on the seasonal migration.

Then, in 1923, the demonic De Beers Company made a deal with the (white) Smuts Government and the entire coastal strip (the winter grazing land) became a prohibited, fenced-off and policed area. The age-old modus of tenure, the heart of the economy for the people living here was destroyed at the stroke of a pen. Mr Oppenheimer & Co proceeded to dig for diamonds and became even richer than they were already from their Kimberley mines (started in 1868). For the next 80 years, they did provide jobs but no compensation for the people whose livelihoods they had taken away. Since the economic slump after 2008 De Beers retrenched but access to the land was not reversed.

Based on the principle that diamonds fetch fabulous prices if the market is tightly controlled, de Beers built a monopoly and even made secret deals with the then USSR; something the USSR kept secret from their ANC/SACP allies. Control and shrewd advertising has kept the moguls of this artificial industry super rich and it impoverished those whose lands it once was.

In March 2013, the South African Human Rights Commission convened a public hearing in Komaggas, in response to the ten men who died when the tunnel they were digging in illegally, collapsed. The hearing was a collective expression of pain and anger from the communities who have remained excluded from the profits of their land for close to 100 years. After the hearings the SAHRC sent a pitiful letter to the affected communities speaking of on-going 'communication' with 'stake-holders' and that the SAHRC lacks financial resources beyond writing and talking to the concerned parties. Sadly, this has put the SAHRC in a poor light in the eyes of those so deeply aggrieved by the whole situation.

The point about injustice is not to forget!

Now a talented young writer, Kimon de Greef, has written a four part series on the mine deaths in 2012, and the wider economic misery that De Beers has left behind it. De Greef writes for the excellent community-based on-line news service ‘GroundUp’, where his articles first appeared.

Komaggas and broader Namaqualand cannot be understood without knowing what caused their economic plight, and what has kept them in poverty.

In Business Report of 10 August 2016 is an article that Mr Christo Wiese, the 168th richest man in the world, who hales ‘from the Northern Cape’, is now forming a consortium to take over the Trans Hex Group (Anton Rupert and Tokyo Sexwale); to make even more money. Mr Wiese is the boss of Shoprite/Checkers, the largest supermarket group in Southern Africa. Trans Hex bought part of the de Beers mining concession in recent times. De Beers however retain their diamond mining right in the intertidal and offshore parts of this coastline. Will Wiese do things differently? – Don’t hold your breath.

I urge you to read de Greef’s four essays (One can be seen below, the others are available on-line – as is a De Beers response, at the bottom of the text.)

GroundUp:

[FEATURE](#) | [NORTHERN CAPE](#)

Rough diamonds - part one: Ten dead men

A desperate quest in a makeshift mine leads to tragedy



A buyer with uncut diamonds in Namaqualand, where thousands rely on the illicit diamond trade.

Text by [Kimon de Greef](#). Photos by [Shaun Swingler](#).

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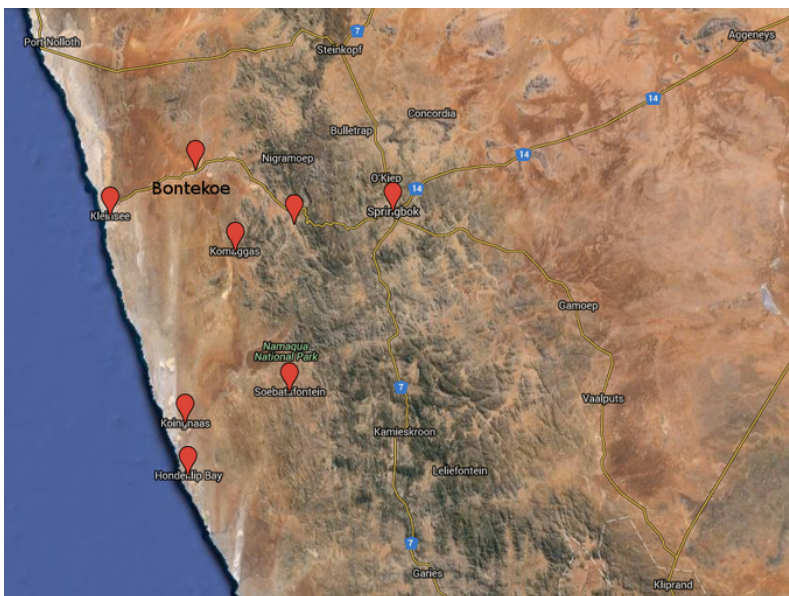
This is part one of a [four-part series](#) on illegal diamond mining in the Northern Cape.

The mineshaft had been dug by hand, descending seven metres through red desert sand before widening into a circular chamber. Repurposed oil drums supported the walls. A worn ladder, held together with steel wire, led back to the surface, where more than 300 diggers waited to enter. An illicit diamond mine at the edge of disused De Beers land, 75 km west of Springbok, the site would

become known as Bontekoe, the name of an adjacent mining area not owned by De Beers. It collapsed in the early hours of 22 May 2012, killing ten people.

The name of the De Beers land was Strydriever, which translates loosely as ‘Struggle River’ or ‘Battle River’. Years had passed since it was last used for legal mining operations, but the ground was still rich in diamonds. The mine’s main chamber, termed the ‘wagkamer’ (‘waiting room’), had space for 40 people at most, squeezed tightly together. Shortly before it caved in, more than 30 diggers crouched shoulder to shoulder beneath the low dirt ceiling, sweating with their shirts off and inhaling stale air, preparing for their chance to belly-crawl into the tunnels.

The tunnels cut horizontally into the earth, following seams of diamond-bearing gravel. Some of the tunnels exceeded ten metres in length, with diameters narrowing to less than one metre. According to diggers, driven to break the law by chronic unemployment in Namaqualand, temperatures inside the tunnels reached 60 degrees Celsius. There was almost no ventilation — matches for lighting cigarettes quickly extinguished themselves once struck. There was also little structural support to withstand the pressure from tons of overlying sediment. But groups of diggers would sit in the wagkamer for more than 12 hours at a time before gaining access, after spending days waiting at the surface. The mine was exceptionally abundant, producing large diamonds on a daily basis, and diggers burrowed ever deeper in spite of the discomfort and risks.



Map of the places discussed in this

series. (Modified from this [Google Map](#).)

Destined for the global luxury goods market, diamonds were the economic mainstay of Namaqualand for more than 80 years, sustaining large-scale mining operations along some 400 km of coastline — half the total length of South Africa's west coast. But a spate of retrenchments from the 1990s onwards left hundreds of people without work, culminating in the single biggest employer in the region, De Beers, closing its mines in 2006. As a consequence of this withdrawal, informal diggers, many of whom were once mineworkers, began targeting the diamonds left behind — fuelling an illicit trade that continues across Namaqualand to this day, despite collapses like the one at Bontekoe.

Inside the mine, at the end of each tunnel, men loosened gravel with crowbars and chisels, filling 10kg maize meal sacks to sieve above ground. The dust rose in clouds, illuminated by their headlamps. It was cramped and difficult to breathe. This work continued without pause, 24 hours a day. As soon as one group exited with their sacks, another took their place. Arguments broke out frequently as rival diggers jostled for position; on occasion this sparked violence, including beatings and stabbings above ground. As word spread about the mine's bounty, people had congregated from further and further away, spending weeks camping out in the veld or in an abandoned mining hostel nearby. The usual diggers from depressed mine towns across Namaqualand — Komaggas, Buffelsrivier, Soebatsfontein, Steinkopf, Port Nolloth — were joined by teams from Cape Town, Johannesburg, and the Eastern Cape. Everybody was chasing rough diamonds, which sell for thousands of rand per carat on the black-market, and the men who'd opened the mine up, and maintained a semblance of order at first, were losing control of the situation.

In the weeks preceding the 2012 collapse, a few diggers had started carrying jackhammers into the wagkamer, powering them with compressors left at the surface. This enabled them to remove gravel faster and access harder rock layers, but threatened the mine's stability. Cracks began to appear in the ceiling. The earth shook intermittently as large boulders shifted. Fearing for their lives, many diggers left, warning the crowd gathered outside that the tunnels were unsafe. People jeered in response, believing that this was merely a ploy to disperse them, and continued climbing into the shaft.



Searching for diamonds, illicit diggers wash gravel near the site of the Bontekoe collapse.

Sidney*, a digger from the coastal village of Hondeklipbaai, 90 minutes drive south of Bontekoe, was one of those who chose to enter. Three diggers from Hondeklipbaai accompanied him, including Aubrey Booies, a compact, muscular man aged 35. As the group waited in the wagkamer, a dreadlocked man began pounding the roof of one tunnel with a jackhammer, raising a deafening noise. A separate group of diggers worked by hand further inside.

“The first stone fell a few minutes later,” Sidney told me when I met him in Hondeklipbaai recently. “We knew right away there was a problem. I shouted at that guy to stop using the jackhammer, because it was dangerous, but he was stubborn, and wouldn’t listen. A white dust was falling; it was like salt, or a thick mist. The guys almost choked. We couldn’t see anything.”

Though frightened, the men remained below ground. The dust settled. When their turn came, they crawled into a tunnel and removed enough gravel to fill three sacks.

“We were on our way out,” Sidney said. “I had just reached the wagkamer again. Aubrey was right next to me. The other two were a little further ahead. Then everything went dark, and the boulders started falling.”

Certain he was about to be killed, Sidney ducked and shut his eyes. Men were screaming all around him. The roar of the earth subsided. The men continued screaming. Sidney lifted his head. He was pinned on his stomach by large stones. His right hip throbbed. His mouth was full of sand. He twisted his neck to see what had happened and saw Aubrey Booies lying beside him, bleeding.

“There was blood coming from his nose, his mouth, his ears — blood everywhere,” Sidney said. “I could barely make out his face. I knew straight away that he was dead. His one hand was stretched forwards, like he was trying to reach me.”

**Name changed.*

This four-part feature was made possible by a Taco Kuiper Grant, administered by [Wits Journalism](#).

[Kimon de Greef](#) is a freelance journalist from Cape Town.

[Part two: "We held onto De Beers, but De Beers drifted away"](#)

[Part three: "If we could work legally, we wouldn't break the law"](#)

[Part four: Illicit digging carries on: To be published on 30 June 2016](#)

[De Beers responds to our questions: To be published on 30 June 2016](#)