

SK Newsletter 15 - Bontekoe

August 2012

Dear friends and relations,

The official unemployment rate in South Africa has doggedly clung to around 25%. Unofficial figures put this figure much higher. As elsewhere in the world, young people are twice as likely to be unemployed than the average.

It is not surprising that, to make ends meet, some poor people have clambered into the massive number of disused and abandoned mines scattered throughout our land, where they scrape for diamonds, gold, copper and coal. Equally unsurprising are reports of deaths in the abandoned mine shafts, a result of rock-falls and collapsing tunnels.

The mines are generally not covered or secured and entry appears reasonably easy. The question why the disused mines are not secured is routinely answered by the Chamber of Mines with a shrug of the shoulders and a statement that it cannot be established who the last owners of the mine were before it was closed down. The burden of securing these mines, it is suggested, rests with the state.

The official view, especially where diamonds and gold are involved, is that those entering the mines are acting illegally and are to be prosecuted if they get caught.

The locals of Komaggas^[i] and surrounding villages are no exception. “Illegal” diamond digging has increased after the mass retrenchments by de Beers Consolidated Diamond Mines since 2008. The huge area de Beers has exclusive access to ever since the 1920’s prevents people from getting to the ocean to this day. De Beers (and the companies they are now selling to) have *de facto* ownership of virtually the whole coastal strip of the Northern Cape.

When Ds. Jetro Cloete, the Reforming Churches’ reverend in Komaggas told me that ten people lost their lives when a shaft collapsed on to them, I was keen to look beyond the superficialities of “illegal mining” leading to “deaths”. My knowledge of the Northern Cape has two roots: My interest into our family history, going back 200 years has given me some insight, but I also served as the head of the South African Fisheries Department from 2000 – 2005, which led me to communities in the area and their complaints of being excluded from fishing due to the mines’ terrestrial and aquatic exclusive access rights along this coastline.

Ds. Cloete, when visiting the families of those who lost their lives, is revealing. Whenever the discussion turned to the deceased men having acted illegally someone in the family would say: but it is our land. People feel to this day that they were robbed of their land and were never compensated.

It is important to consider the deeper issues of social justice that have led to the mining deaths and, as elsewhere in South Africa, there is a past of injustice that impacts forcefully on the current poverty.

A shortened version of my essay below appeared in the Afrikaans language newspaper *Die Burger* on 20 June 2012. By placing it with this newspaper the story reached the people of the Northern Cape and in the language the people there speak.

On the day the article appeared a further incident of a mine death was reported, this time in the nearby Concordia [ii]. A couple, walking at night in the dark, slipped on loose gravel and Beau Booys (24) fell thirty meters into a disused copper mine shaft. Police divers abandoned the search for his body as the acid into which he had fallen 'was burning the divers'.

This is what I wrote:

For a short while there was outrage when ten men died digging illegally for diamonds in the Hondeklipbaai-Kleinsee area of the Northern Cape. The place where disaster struck is known as Bontekoe (cow of many colours). Twelve miners scrambled to safety. Imagine, desert sand and rubble caving in on you. During your last gasps you inhale dust and then sand. The dead men, probably all retrenched in recent times by de Beers Consolidated Diamond Mines, must have often thought and dreaded such a death, also during their employment there. They were not the first who have died here.

What did South African readers think when they read about these young people? - They acted illegally; they should accept the danger that comes with stealing. Or worse, did they think: they did it to themselves!

After the deaths the dead men's mates said defiantly that they would be back, digging those shafts. They have no problem with being on the wrong side of the law. They are young, poor and have no prospect of a job.

Initially the survivors and local families pitched in to dig for survivors. Then the big men from de Beers arrived, banned the locals from the scene and soon declared that it was pointless to try and find the remaining bodies. Rapid decomposition makes identification difficult.

Outrage lives on in the communities of Hondeklipbaai, Koingnaas, Buffelsrevier and Komaggas. But where should their rage - and ours - be directed?



Rescue

operation at Botekoe.

What drove these young men? Grinding poverty is one explanation. I visited Hondeklipbaai with the then Deputy Minister of Environmental Affairs, Rejoice Mabudafhasi, more than a decade ago. Hopelessness was pervasive then, as the locals told us at a gathering in the community hall. Because of our visit de Beers pumped drinking water through the town's limited reticulation system on the day of our visit, instead of the usual brackish water. This community remains desperately in need of basic services.

The people here dream of a past when they owned livestock, choosing pastures for their animals in a wide radius around the village. Then diamond mining stopped them! They also dream of the time when a fishing fleet and factory operated here. And imagine: 150 years ago, sailing vessels took passengers and cargo from Cape Town to this now forgotten place.

But the root of the outrage is far deeper than the absence of

work and lack of services.

Diamonds have been mined here for the past ninety years. Nearly the whole coastal strip became a high security fenced and patrolled no-go area for those who made their living here. Trespassing on this land has landed people in jail for long periods, all because of a stone that has no intrinsic value. The history of illicit diamond buying and selling (IDB in the criminal code), has attracted fortune hunters throughout history, but unless you belong to the chosen oligarchs, long prison sentences await you.

When work took me into this mining sanctum, the entry and exit regime reminded me of my crossing the border posts into fascist Portugal. The miners are physically searched, also invasively, each day, before going home. Lie-detector tests and one-way mirrors form part of the arsenal that ensures these stones achieve the price the cartel wants.

For the past ninety years ordinary citizens have not seen this coastline. The towns within it, Kleinzee and Koingnaas are the private property of de Beers who control all services, shops, petrol stations and bars. All this so that foolish men will buy stones that are then treasured by gullible women swayed by de Beers' age-old sexist slogan that 'diamonds are a girl's best friend'.

To do this de Beers needs another accomplice: the State. This charade could not happen if de Beers was not afforded the protective mantle of the Government who periodically re-allocates the concessions. This mantle was first provided when Jannie Smuts was Prime Minister and we were still subjects of that other diamond aficionado King George V of Great Britain.

To get concessions demands schmoozing with rulers. The Oppenheimers knew how and it made them amongst the richest families on earth. Other robber barons on this coast are, the Ruperts (Trans Hex) and more recently our Minister of Home Affairs, Tokyo Sexwale (share holding in Trans Hex).

So surrounded is the community of Hondeklipbaai by prison fences they cannot go and fish for a living either. The sea has also been granted to de Beers because diamonds are sucked with giant hoovers from every crevasse under water. A narrow five-kilometre corridor is all the people of Hondeklipbaai have access to. If you veer south or north you enter the security zone that extends from the land into the sea. With their small boats they are thus tempted to fish further off shore than is safe, where once more, death stalks their precarious existence.

The global recession of 2008 and the end of finding diamonds 'worth it' in this area, coincided for de Beers. It resulted in their retrenching virtually their entire workforce. That's "business", I hear someone say but for those who worked here for three generations it was disaster. Retrenchment packages soon dried up. Local pastors testify to the spiraling social breakdown where many men have left for pastures elsewhere.

Not shy to polishing its image, de Beers, upon closing the biggest part of its operations announced they wanted to leave behind a 'lasting legacy'. Sounds positive! They wanted to create alternate employment for the communities who had depended on them for nearly a century.

A few local people, impressive NGO's like reputable USA based Conservation International and others, hired international

experts from places where deserts have successfully been turned into productive agriculture, horticulture, aquaculture and conservation ventures. We were asked to help make this legacy real – all at our own expense! But de Beers did not keep its promises. Repeated talk-shops got halted when the persons de Beers sent to talk to us where themselves, retrenched.

The young miners died because de Beers have left no legacy. No employment source of any impact has been created. And Government equally failed for not insisting that de Beers implement its 'lasting legacy'.

What could have been done? For example, de Beers has defaced this coast with hundreds of diggings, holes up to fifteen meters deep and one kilometer long. De Beers says by law they are obliged to rehabilitate the area by filling the holes. But if political will, company goodwill and a committed civil society existed, this area could have become a foremost aquaculture area, a win-win by turning the holes in the inter-tidal zone into oyster, muscle, seaweed and even fin fish tanks. At fisheries we commissioned successful experiments that demonstrated that these are realistic options. Wind power, desalination plants, fog harvesting for water and more were all investigated. The plans we developed now gather dust somewhere.

De Beers' culpability extends further. They killed the culture of the communities here too. The dead men's ancestors were well-to-do cattle and goat herders until 1920 when the security fence stopped them from taking their livestock to the coast in winter where the climate was more temperate, water was abundant and vegetation provided animal sustenance. The Khoikhoi had practiced nomadic animal husbandry here since time immemorial. In summer, rains sustained life in the hills further

inland. Their coastal land was taken without compensation.

In Rustenburg the Bafokeng people share in the platinum profits because the mineral was found on their ancestral land. In Norway communities share in the profits from gas exploited offshore in the areas nearest to them.

The people of Hondeklipbaai, Komaggas, Koingnas, and Buffelsrivier got nothing. They were robbed.

Horst Kleinschmidt

[i] Komaggas: For those of you who have received this Newsletter recently only, my interest in Komaggas stems from the following circumstance. It is the place where my great, great, great grandfather (Hinrich Schmelen, 1776 -1848), who hailed from Kassebruch, near Bremen, Germany and his Khoikhoi wife (Zara, nee Hendricks //Geixas, born ca. 1793 – 1821) who hailed from Steinkopf, near Komaggas, lived and brought up their four children. Hinrich Schmelen's grave is in Komaggas. Zara was buried at Botmas Hof, Heuningberg, near Porterville – a two or three day ox- wagon journey north from Cape Town. Their second daughter Johanna, married Missionary Heinrich Kleinschmidt in Komaggas. Initially the Komaggas mission was under the direction of the London Mission Society but when they focused their attention on the Eastern Cape, the newly founded German Rhenish Mission took over in the Northern Cape.

[ii] Concordia was a Rhenish mission station in the 19th century.

At one point the missionary there was Hermann Hegner (1840 – 1915) who had married Elizabeth Kleinschmidt, second daughter of missionary Heinrich and Hanna Kleinschmidt. Elizabeth (1844 – 1913). She was born in Windhoek, Namibia when her parents together with missionary Hugo Hahn tried to establish a mission at the place where the Oorlam Kaptein Jonker Afrikaner had settled with his people after their exodus from the Cape Colony.