

A JOURNEY TO South Africa

A NEWSLETTER IN SOLIDARITY
WITH SOUTH AFRICAN
VANADIUM MINE WORKERS

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M I S S I O N S T A T E M E N T

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In response to our heartfelt concerns about the environmental hazards and health and safety risks of mining vanadium and the severe economic hardships imposed on mining families due to the occupational disabilities that vanadium miners can suffer, we have drafted the following aims and objectives:

- to promote awareness of the hazards of vanadium mining
- to help bring about possible scientific, medical, technical and legal solutions
- to mobilize humanitarian support for the victims of those adversely impacted by the mining of vanadium as it is presently conducted
- to assist and advocate USA multinational corporate responsibility for the safety of vanadium miners in the workplace and recommend adequate compensation packages should occupational disabilities occur as a result of unsafe, hazardous mining operations
- to create sustainable strategies for development in communities adversely impacted by the mining of vanadium
- to conduct an environmental site assessment of the mining extraction location and processing plant, as well as the surrounding communities impacted by the mining of vanadium
- to conduct public health surveys concerning the impact of vanadium mining, not only as it pertains to the miners but also their families and members of the surrounding communities who are exposed to the toxic environment created by the mining of vanadium
- to create alternative vocational training programs to

open up other employment opportunities for miners adversely affected by the mining of vanadium

- to seek compensation for the victims affected by hazardous vanadium mining operations
- to promote community outreach programs to inform miners, their families and the community-at-large of the environmental and health risks due to the hazards of mining vanadium
- to encourage the production of a documentary on the hazards of vanadium mining, including a study of its impact on the life/health of the mines, their families, the surrounding communities and the environment
- to implement the recommendations that arose out of a bilateral conference (USA/South Africa) convened in South Africa, summer of 2003, to discuss the environmental hazards and medical risks of vanadium mining as it is presently conducted and the economic hardships imposed on miners and their families as a result of the occupational disabilities that miners suffer
- to promote and assist the implementation of "best practices" for communities impacted by hazardous vanadium mining operations
- to provide educational funding and opportunities for children of families adversely affected by hazardous vanadium mining practices
- to document the affects of the mining of vanadium in the small town of Brits, South Africa, incorporating a historical overview, environmental assessment of the site and surrounding communities, medical evaluations, economic impact study, public health review, gender and children analyses and USA/SA government accountability study.



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Diane Dittrick
Newsletter Director

I would especially like to thank President Judith Shapiro, Dean Vivian Taylor and Rosalind Rosenberg for their continued support and to the many who have contributed to the production of the symposium.

AN OUTSIDE PERSPECTIVE: NOTE FROM ANOTHER MELLON FELLOW

Alexis Pauline Gumbs
Mellon Fellow '04

This symposium and the accompanying publication are unique opportunities for you and I to travel discursively and vicariously into the political, economic and physical context of South Africa. If not for editing this publication, I would know nothing of the contradictory and compelling situations in contemporary South Africa. I hope that this publication and the insights offered by those who actually journeyed to South Africa allow you to move into a new context as well.

Elizabeth Gery
Art Director

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JOURNEY UNDER A Soprano Sky

by Kendra Tappin

As our small aircraft descended onto the Skukuza Airstrip in Nelspruit, the capital of Mpumalanga, South Africa, I sat at rapt attention awaiting the promise of a new day in South Africa. Like an eager child, unwrapping the biggest birthday gift, I tugged the window screen and found radiant sunlight stab my eyes. Still, even the blinding sunlight didn't deter me – it didn't waiver my anticipation to see more. The land I saw below astonished me: jagged and protruding curves, myriad intertwining roads like nests of mating snakes, homes and lives nestled against the red clay soil. All of these things were permanently etched into the earth's memory, each with a shared story of creation.

While Johannesburg was saturated with restless rhythms: of markets, uniformed school children and workers scrambling for early morning and evening buses, Nelspruit quiescently languished under the sun. Refusing to settle into the seat of the rented minivan, I stared at the striking panorama, as we continued our drive north to Krugar National Park. Greeting me were

long winding roads lined with ostentatious jacarandas and tall pine trees stationed as sentries along the way. The earth was dry, the hills steep and dusty. Like a lover playfully whispering in my ear, each of the things I saw and wanted to fall into, reached out and gently took my hands.

Surrounded by clay-colored stone walls and tall trees, Jock

“Refusing to settle into the seat of the rented minivan, I stared at the striking panorama, as we continued our drive north to Krugar National Park.”

Safari Lodge stood at the confluence of the Biyamiti and the Mitomeni Rivers. Each guest was escorted to one of twelve private rondavels that offered gracious views, privacy, seclusion and time to reflect. As the first private lodge to offer accommodations to visitors desperate to experience the

bushveld, Jock still held an old world ambiance that harkened back to the time of South Africa's first gold rush in 1886. In the main yard uniformed trackers and servers briskly and quietly moved, veiled by their various tasks. In one instance a woman wearing a long dark skit, crisp white shirt and a black cardigan, hustled behind the kitchen's backdoor. Another woman, dressed in bright colors and a head wrap, bowed like an aged willow and silently swept the ground. Simultaneously, a tall man, with skin the color of aged, burnished mahogany, carried a stack of boxes to the front office.

Lost in the maze of activity that kept the lodge in perfect working order, I nearly stumbled when the park ranger and tracker, unexpectedly arrived. Dressed in the traditional khaki-colored safari suit and dark athletic sunglasses, Conrad swaggered over to our Land Rover with a long rifle. In a sonorous voice that wafted around us, he spoke of what to expect on the evening safari. Loading and then checking his rifle, he commanded our attention.

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"Don't hang out of the vehicle and no matter what, do exactly as I tell you!"

Then silently, Godfrey, the tracker who would accompany us, appeared. Then he called out and the heavy wooden gates to the lodge were opened.

The roads sloped slightly beneath the heavy tires on the enormous Land Rover. Immense fallen trees told the story of hungry elephants looking for treats. Boulders nearly rubbing the underbelly of the sky became a perch for elusive kudu to meditate like gurus. Rays of receding sunlight escaped through carved slits in the sky. They didn't illuminate, but instead cast shadows of things unknown lurking all around. I heard the tour guide's hypnotic voice calmly unravel some of nature's truths. Lulled by the rhythm of the conversations going on around me, I found myself perking up, curious to decipher the mysteries, and understand the intermittent Zulu conversation that the ranger shared with the tracker. Lost in my thoughts, I burrowed into a soft fleece blanket and let the early evening air wrap itself around me.

By the time we returned, night had blanketed the lodge and swaddled us at nature's bosom. I was excited and humbled by all the things I had observed and absorbed in the preceding hours. Eager for time to savor the experience of the day, I leapt from the Land Rover, graciously accepted a glass of warm, spiced apple cider and retreated to my room.

At dinner, our grou, and another table of German tourists were joined by rangers. As our meal was served, I began to think about the legacy of South Africa's history. I thought about the workers I'd seen earlier, about Godfrey's silent appearance, and his absence from the evening meal. It seemed predetermined that Godfrey's place wasn't with the tourists. This subtle confrontation with the legacy of life in South Africa left me pensive. As the dinner concluded, I was eager for solitude, for time to think. On the way to my room I noticed that the air outside had changed. While the early evening air was soft, the wind was now blowing furiously. That night, I listened as the trees and bushes writhed in tortured agony.

The next morning, I awoke to the shrilling sound of the telephone.

The 5 a.m. boot-camp sounded the alarm for the impending sunrise safari. Groggy but wanting to break the grasp of the emotions I felt from the night before, I rolled out of bed and got dressed. Grateful that I'd heeded my mother's warning to "Pack warm clothes!" I snuggled into my winter jacket, mittens and hat, ready to face the cold morning air. The sun had yet to make an appearance, but by the time I finished a warm cup of tea and ate a few rusks, the night's dark clouds were rolling back like carpets, exposing the pale blue sky and cotton candy white clouds. The rising sun awakened my senses, and alerted to the beginning of a new day. I could smell the clean air and feel the sun absorbing the night's dew that had fallen to refresh and quench the earth. I listened as birds made morning calls. I saw elephants, rhino, hyena and cheetah, all settling into the daily rhythms of their work. I felt the pulsing heart, heard the gently rippling laughter of that force which welcomed me. Awed and humbled, I became certain of the ground on which I stood and the blue sky sheltering me.



The Apartheid Museum located in Johannesburg, South Africa reflects the rise and fall of the apartheid system in South Africa, a system that systematically turned all non-white people into second-class citizens. Upon entering the Apartheid Museum, you have a choice: you can experience apartheid South Africa as a non-white person or a white person. I chose to enter on the non-white side, and as I entered, scores of the racial identification cards that all South Africans were required to carry assailed me. The faces that stared back had looks of despair not dissimilar to photos of disfranchised blacks taken during the Jim Crow era in the United States. From that point the museum takes you through forty-six years of struggle and suffering, passing by nooses, as well as images of anti-apartheid radicals, and ending with campaign posters for the 1994 election year. The difference between the segregated entranceway and the celebratory posters of Nelson Mandela and the African National Council at the exit brought to life the intensity and uplifting finale of South Africa's most recent half century.

- by Alexandria Wright



Gender Disparities and Vanadium Poisoning

by Marsha Coleman-Adebago

Little attention has been paid to women exposed to vanadium pentoxide. This exposure can occur either through living with their husbands, who mine vanadium and carry the deadly substance in their hair, nails and skin, or through the care and maintenance of mining uniforms. These women live in the community contiguous to the mine, the pollution permeates the soil, air and water supply. Research on the impact of vanadium exposure on fetal/child development and pregnancy is scarce. And recently, women have started working in the mine.

In addition, animals, such as the chickens that are raised as a source of food in this community are of concern. It's a vicious cycle: the chickens eat the grass that is contaminated by vanadium dust and the families eat the chickens, thereby completing a cycle of contamination, poison and death. During my interviews in 1999 with numerous wives of vanadium mine workers, I talked with a widow that described the suspicious death of her infant child. This widow gave birth to three children. Two of the children were sent to live with her mother in another rural area. The child who remained with the couple was often tied to her mother's back during the laundry of her husband's uniforms. In addition, the child slept between the mother and father at night. According to the mother, before the child died, she experienced asthma-like symptoms and

developed a greenish-colored tongue. She appealed to the mining company for medical assistance for her husband and child but her plea was denied. She later requested burial assistance from the mine but was again denied. Of the forty interviews, this was the most difficult and painful. These interviews provide antidotal information that points toward the necessity for further research of the hazards and health risks of the mining of vanadium.

Widows of vanadium mine workers are left financially destitute. The mine fires the workers once the miners become ill. The workers return home to be cared for by their wives and children, imposing another layer of economic pressure on the home economy. Children are often forced to leave school due to a lack of funds, which are necessary instead for food and housing expenses.

Unexpectedly, I found that the majority of the women who I interviewed also complained of upper respiratory illnesses, asthma, bronchitis and cancer. In one interview, a widow told me that she had not eaten in two days. When I visited her home, during an unscheduled visit, I found the kitchen completely without food. When I provided some money for food, I found out later that she took the money and paid her rent instead. After I found out, I asked her why she had not purchased food for her family with the money. She told me that she would rather be hungry than homeless. After completing routine interview questions, I asked

her what she missed most about her husband, a miner at the Vametco plant, she replied with "his laughter – it filled our home."

Adding to the complexity of this situation is the fact that the former apartheid system survived on the exploitation of cheap black labor. Black lives, according to apartheid architects, had no value outside of their relevance to white economic exploitation. Therefore, accurate records were not kept of African deaths and injuries as a result of exposure to vanadium. Despite the dangers and serious health effects on mine workers, the South African economy relies heavily on the mining sector for its foreign exchange. In fact, 60% of the South African foreign exchange is derived from the mining industry.

The international community must come to the aid of South Africa's vanadium mine workers. Multinational corporations cannot carry out human rights abuses in the name of its western industrial policy. The rights of workers cannot coincide with an accident of birth. The lives and deaths of vanadium mine workers must become part of the American consciousness, particularly since our quality of life is dependent on the daily sacrifice of South African vanadium mine workers. The journey to South Africa by Barnard College students and faculty and the symposium on the issue of the vanadium mine workers is the first step in a long process of providing support.

There Is Only One Option for Multinational Corporations in the Third World:

VANADIUM MINING IN SOUTH AFRICA, A CASE STUDY

by Jacob Ngakane

Multinational corporations are intrinsically very powerful instruments that can either contribute positively or negatively to global sustainable development. I, therefore, want to argue that there is only one option for multinational corporations in the third world, that is, to positively contribute to the sustainable development of humankind.

I find it difficult to understand how the captains of capital can consciously transfer dangerous operations to developing countries. I am a former trade unionist. I applied my trade in South Africa for more than twenty years, representing the interest of workers and the broader community. As a trade unionist, I came close to seeing the slow process of death while I worked in Brits, South Africa, with vanadium mine workers. During this time, I saw friends, breadwinners and comrades disintegrating before my eyes, whilst I argued on their behalf with mine owners.

I have always known about dangerous operations in the workplace. My father lost his right hand from working with an unguarded textile machine. The insult he received was bitterly felt by the family. The textile company told him that he intentionally cut off his hand in order to get monetary compensation. The former apartheid government and the textile company he worked for did not feel responsible for the "accident." This is one out of many cases affecting Black South Africans.

I listened to many mine workers tell their stories about what happened during the former apartheid regime. I've read doctors/scientists' reports saying that they can't link the illnesses of the workers with the workplace. I've witnessed workers lying on their beds at home experiencing anal bleeding, swollen feet, difficulty breathing and even more. The patterns were the same. They died. I attended funerals. I listened to their spouses and family, as they talked about their partners' health experiences. They spoke the same

language, shared the same pain and same bleak future. All of the deaths resulting from these dangerous operations were written off as "natural causes" on death certificates. Nature cannot be that cruel and so selective. It does not operate like the apartheid system – it does not discriminate.

The white medical/scientific fraternity in apartheid South Africa defended the mining companies. The medical community declared that the companies were not responsible for the pain and suffering of vanadium poisoning. This declaration, however, only pertained to black workers and the black community. In the old South Africa, black life and labor was cheap. The former President of South Africa Nelson Mandela never stopped arguing against the manner in which blacks were treated. It was a painful experience to go through the hell of apartheid. Writing about it and recalling the previous events is not an easy assignment.

It is more painful when you experience and know that whites were treated differently. The only worker from the South African vanadium operation that I know of who received compensation was a white male. When white farmers complained about the impact on the environment a chimney was erected so the emissions of dangerous gases only impacted the black community.

As South Africans, we know that we don't have to be rocket scientists to know death, or some patterns of death.

Treatment and healing starts from acknowledging there is something wrong, rather than defend the indefensible. Recently in South Africa, Richard Spoor, a well-known health and safety attorney was able to negotiate an out-of-court settlement with one of the major vanadium companies in South Africa. Part of the settlement agreement included compensation and corrective measures for the victims.

It is my understanding that corrective steps in the mining operation were taken at Vametco in Brits, South Africa, after protests in South African

and the U.S. yet, we must still engage the former workers who were fired after the strike. We must find ways and means to reach a settlement that will take into account the following:

- the dignity of the victims and their families;
- compensation for chronic illnesses and death;
- pension funds and
- corrective mining practices.

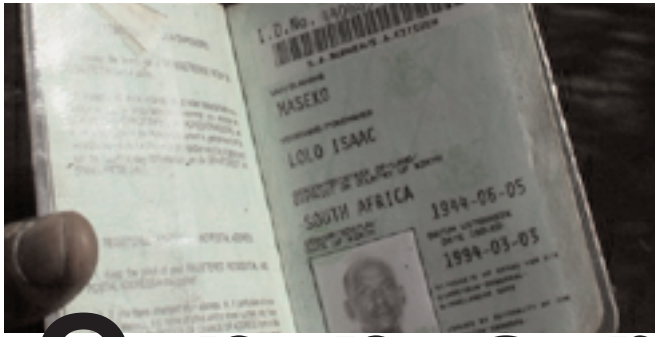
Former workers have organized around their shared pain. They have their own representative committee members and lawyers. Vametco and Strategic Minerals Corporation should do the honorable thing and come to the negotiating table to reach an amicable resolution.

I have spent my entire life fighting for social justice consistent with progressive universal declarations. South Africa has benefited immensely from the teachings of social justice. Today it is in our constitution that every individual is protected against environmental assaults to our health. We need all stakeholders to work as partners and not as opponents in order to achieve this end.

We need to move away from hostile relationships and into cooperative relations. Hostility creates an unsafe world and disturbs world peace efforts.

It has been more than fifteen years since the first vanadium victims reached out to the international community for help. Many have died and many more are chronically ill. Justice remains elusive. Victims are up against strong opposition with an abundance of resources at their disposal. The victims are unemployed and without medical treatment. They are armed only with their screams for help and their commitment to justice. And they lack financial resources to fight.

We must continue to write about the victims. Is this the only weapon we have? Citizens of the world must pull their resources together to serve humanity. It is the only option we have.



Opportunity

“Poverty circumscribes the potential of those who should be active participants in the endogenous growth of the South African economy.” **COSTS**

by Hayley Holness

As I stare blankly out of the large window that dominates the wall on my left, a plump rooster struts across the burnt grass. Everything I have seen since arriving to South Africa intrigues me. I am currently standing uncomfortably in a tiny yet impeccably clean dining room. A young woman about my age is sitting down at a mahogany table feeding her infant son. Her name is Gloria Ramasela Sebone and she dreams of one day working as a chemical engineer. Despite her exceptional drive and passing marks on the national standardized exam required for admission to a university in South Africa, she is still unable to receive a post-secondary education. Her family's lack of financial resources places the \$400 tuition well beyond reach. Her father, Benedict Sebone, is ill and out of work so she helps to support her family however she can. Still, she dreams of one day continuing her education.

At the end of July, the Mellon Mays Undergraduate Foundation sent four students from Barnard College including me, Hayley Holness, to South Africa to assist Marsha Coleman-Adebayo in the research of several miners' claims of vanadium poisoning. Vanadium is an inorganic compound

used to fortify steel and has been linked to various pulmonary disorders. A group of South African miners living in a town called Brits have organized to fight the vanadium mining company Vametco, a vanadium mining company, owned by Strategic Minerals Corporation, an American company based in Danbury, Connecticut. While employed by Vametco, these miners allege that the company exposed them to hazardous conditions that eventually left them suffering from ailments ranging from chronic bronchitis, asthma, kidney failure to sexual dysfunction.

Despite the dangerous working conditions, every day there are men waiting outside the factory hoping to find employment. The level of unemployment in South Africa is desperately high and therefore multinational corporations can readily exploit workers in this labor surplus economy. Benedict is one of these miners. After falling ill, Benedict, like the other miners, lost his job. Benedict was replaceable as a laborer and therefore Vametco treated him as if he were disposable.

The desire to attract foreign investment to South Africa has resulted in a dearth of labor laws protecting workers' rights. President Mbeki hopes that the capital investment multina-

tional mining companies provide will lead to sustained economic growth. Eventually as more jobs are created the position of workers vis-à-vis their employers will improve. In the long term, Mbeki believes this will lead to higher wages, safer working conditions, and other benefits enjoyed by workers in industrialized nations.

However, in the interim an entire generation of bright and capable young people languish. Poverty circumscribes the potential of those who should be active participants in the endogenous growth of the South African economy. Without the means to educate themselves, future South African scientists, entrepreneurs and scholars will struggle to emerge. South Africa will have difficulty sustaining any economic development it can achieve without a skilled labor force. What the future of South Africa needs is an investment in human capital coupled with other efforts toward development.

As a young woman who has been able to seize every opportunity to explore her potential, the tragedy of Benedict's daughter's circumstances is particularly poignant. She is my age and shares my drive and were it not for the capricious whims of fate our positions could easily be reversed.

You can help by sending donations to the **No FEAR INSTITUTE, South Africa,**
P.O. Box 681, Glen Echo, Maryland 20812-0681.

A JOURNEY TO South Africa

A Research Symposium
March 25, 2004

Introduction

JUDITH SHAPIRO

President, Barnard College

Opening Address

MARSHA COLEMAN-ADEBAYO

President of the No Fear Coalition and the No Fear Institute
Barnard College 1974

Research Panel

PANEL MODERATED BY PROFESSOR TIM HALPIN-HEALY

Physics & Astronomy Department, Barnard College

“Vanadium Mining in South Africa”

ALEXANDRA SEVERINO

GE Scholar, Barnard College 2005

“Knowledge, Power and the Pursuit of Truth Surrounding Vanadium Mining”

ALEXANDRA ELIZABETH WRIGHT

Mellon Fellow, Barnard College 2005

“Digging Deep: Labor and the Mining Industry in Early Twentieth Century South Africa”

KENDRA TAPPIN

Mellon Fellow, Barnard College 2005

“Civil Society and Poverty: A Case of South African Mines”

HAYLEY HOLNESS

Mellon Fellow, Barnard College 2005

Concluding Address

JACOB NGAKANE

Former Organizer of the Congress of South Africa Trade Union

RECEPTION TO FOLLOW THE PROGRAM

ALSO FEEL FREE TO WATCH THE ORIGINAL DOCUMENTARY FAILURE IS NOT AN OPTION: THE PLIGHT OF VANADIUM MINE
WORKERS IN SOUTH AFRICA IN THE ADJACENT EXHIBITION SPACE

BOTH THE JOURNEY AND THE SYMPOSIUM WERE MADE POSSIBLE THROUGH THE GENEROSITY OF THE BARNARD MELLON
MAYS UNDERGRADUATE FELLOWSHIP PROGRAM OF THE ANDREW W. MELLON FOUNDATION AND THE GE FOUNDATION

DIANE DITTRICK, SYMPOSIUM CREATIVE DIRECTOR/PRODUCER