

Women from KwaZulu-Natal's mining war zone stand their ground against big coal

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Skeletons of cattle and other animals litter a desolate looking land once lush with vegetation. The phenomenon of drought has never been experienced as badly, say the Indigenous People of this ancestral land of the Zulus known as Fuleni.

A major coal company is being blamed. Johannesburg-based Petmin, which has operated in Somkhele since 2007. Early on, it dug out graves of ancestors to get at the rich anthracite. But in doing so, the Johannesburg firm removed the bones without requiting the long-rested spirits of the dead, in violation of sacred traditional protocol. Residents remain livid.

Hundreds of people removed from their land around Somkhele were also abandoned by their traditional and elected leaders. Bought-off chiefs and politicians decided to side with the Johannesburg tormentors, thus permitting the rapid pollution of nearby water, land and air.

Coal barons versus communities and conservation

The man in charge of Petmin is Ian Cockerill. No small fry, he was once the boss at both AngloCoal and

Gold Fields. His corporate biography claims he is, "Chairman of Leadership for Conservation in Africa, a not-for-profit initiative in partnership with the South African Parks Board."

Cockerill may need this kind of green sugar-coating because of the poison pills he dishes out in Somkhele, both to residents and animals in the nearby game park just 17km from his massive coal mine. The Hluhluwe-iMfolozi nature reserve is Africa's oldest formal park. It is also the area where the Black and White iMfolozi Rivers join, which two hundred years ago, King Shaka Zulu declared to be his royal hunting ground.

Today another firm, Ibutho Coal, is repeating the same destructive exercise in a larger zone of Fuleni about 20km south west of Somkhele, a mere 40m from the border of the park. Last month, Ibutho's mysterious leaders – including Peter Gain and Tom Borman, who have ties to the world's leading mining house, BHP Billiton, and world's main commodity trader, Glencore – tried again to descend quietly and stealthily like thieves against the people of Fuleni to devour their land in search of coal.

Ibutho Coal filed a 'Fuleni Scoping Report' with the government on March 3rd, renewing a license to dig

coal over an area hundreds of kilometres wide. But it was clearly lacking integrity, according to the Global Environmental Trust's Sinegugu Zukulu: "My worry is that while the report mentions the need to consult communities further, it is often a mere box ticking exercise for mining companies to be granted the green light."

Zukulu is also a leader in the struggle to beat back an attack by an Australian mining house at the world's tenth largest titanium reserve, at Xolobeni on the Wild Coast beaches a few hundred kilometres south of Fuleni. He was a close ally of the Trust's founder, the revered conservationist Ian Player. Before passing away late last year, Player insisted on a combined campaign strategy to link animals' survival with better conditions for Somkhele and for the Fuleni villages bordering Hluhluwe-iMfolozi, where for decades he worked to bring white rhinos back from near extinction.

If a massive coal mine is established on the border of the iMfolozi Wilderness Area which Player established, increased ease of access by rhino poachers will quickly doom hundreds more of the endangered animals, Zukulu's colleagues at the Trust predict.

Women Stand their Ground against Big Coal

In the village of Ocilwane, certain to be destroyed by Ibutho's mining strategy, community activist Mam Khuluse insists, "that the coal should be left in the hole." She is a survivor of forced removals which took place in 1961 in Cwaka, near the port city of Richards

Bay from where the Somkhele coal is exported. Khuluse is unwilling to be moved again, and along with others in her community, she is fighting for their land not to become ravaged like Somkhele.

It is one thing for the women victims of mining to tell their stories, and another for one to see this personally. One site visit was in conjunction with a "Women Stand their Ground Against Big Coal" regional exchange in January. It was evident that the land women have been dependent upon for aeons has been destroyed. Women who toil as cooks and care-givers, as small farmers and as gatherers of wood and water from nature now cannot feed their families: nothing grows anymore, except aloes.

The women date this long drought to Petmin's arrival. The desolation is striking when contrasted with the huge, profitable estates owned by white farmers and sugarcane companies just 50 kilometers away, towards the sea.

In most of sub-tropical KwaZulu-Natal, vegetation is green and healthy. In Somkhele, in contrast, there are no beans, maize, fruits, nothing but a skeletal land, dry like death. The Somkhele residents' water was essentially confiscated by the mine. It is now a trickle-down resource, provided by a water truck once a week or even a fortnight.

In a nearby lodge the water coming from the tap in the bathroom was black like ash. The owner was asked what he thought about the mine. He was perturbed by the question since it brings occasional business, but

Sister solidarity against mining: from KZN to the eastern DRC

At a recent International Women's Day gathering in Durban organised by Fossil Free KZN, Khuluse and others from Ocilwane and Somkhele shared experiences with sisters from the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo who are now refugees facing xenophobic attacks.

One reason they are refugees is that South African companies like AngloGold Ashanti have worked hand-in-glove with warlords in the DRC to extract minerals such as the coltan we use in our phones, according to Human Rights Watch. The results included 5.4 million conflict-related deaths there from 1998-2007 alone, according to the International Committee of the Red Cross.

In the same area near the Uganda border, the nephew of the South African president, Khulubuse Zuma, somehow won access to a \$10 billion oil concession from DRC president Laurent Kabila in 2010, working closely with Kabila's other close ally, the notorious Israeli mining tycoon Dan Gertler.

Conveniently, in 2013 the SA National Defence Force placed more than 1,500 troops there to improve the investment climate.

Do ordinary workers and shack residents in Durban who are attacking our Congolese sisters and brothers have any understanding of the reasons so many have had to flee to our country?

he listened when told about the attention Somkhele is getting as a result of activist campaigning.

He admitted that Somkhele's air is full of dust from coal ash. People suffer frequent respiratory disorders when inhaling chemicals used in coal mining. In this area, a large share of the residents are still recovering from the deadly grip of HIV/Aids (they get medicines now thanks to Treatment Action Campaign lobbying). But the coal mine's air-borne particulates spread more diseases like TB, taking many more from HIV+ to full-blown AIDS status.

It suddenly dawned on the lodge owner why his business friends who gathered at his pub for drinks were

more often complaining of chest pains and breathing difficulties.

The situation in Somkhele is dire, with houses developing cracks because of frequent blasting at Petmin's mine. In the next villages in the mining companies' firing lines, Ocilwane and Ntuthunga, the time has come to fight back.

But activists like Khuluse and Zukulu and their community organisations, NGOs and environmental networks are badly underfunded. And it is here that the link between coal, climate and our liabilities in the Global North comes full-circle.

At the UKZN Centre for Civil Society, scholars of reparations are looking at how a climate debt paid to anti-coal activists might work.

Paying the climate debt

The tragedy of Somkhele is partly that the region's drought is an early manifestation of climate change, which will hit African peasant areas like Fuleni as hard as anywhere on earth. Burning coal is a leading cause of climate change. Somkhele anthracite goes to the electricity parastatal Eskom to burn so that mining mega-corporations get extremely cheap power for their digging and smelting. BHP Billiton's electricity price is R0.12 per kilowatt hour thanks to corrupt apartheid-era deal-making renewed after 2000.

Somkhele coal travels on huge trucks 60km southeast to Richards Bay where along with 80 million tonnes of other coal, it is exported to major buyers in Europe, India, China and the Middle East. In these places, is the burning of coal accompanied by awareness about the damage done upstream, back in the Fuleni area?

These links are gaining visibility thanks to *The Guardian's* climate campaign, clicktivists at Avaaz, and the crowd-source funder Grrrowd who are all helping to put the Fuleni struggle in the spotlight. But if international climate activists also join in, that may be decisive. Coal prices are at very low levels – around \$60/tonne, down from \$140/tonne four years ago – and it won't take much to persuade investors to divest from coal companies like Petmin and Ibutho, especially if they are linked to the threat against the people and animals of Fuleni.

At the same time that the Climate Justice movement calls on the Global North to pay a 'climate debt' that

is legitimately owed to African drought victims like Mam Khuluse, the struggles of activists like these against coal will rebound to help the whole world combat climate change.

At the UKZN Centre for Civil Society, scholars of reparations are looking at how a climate debt paid to anti-coal activists might work. The present system of payments for greenhouse gas mitigation and adaptation via the Korea-based Green Climate Fund is already a failure on multiple levels, and the 'loss and damage' liability accounting countries have pushed for in the United Nations climate summit since 2012 is being blocked by rich countries.

Instead of relying on the elites to start this process, a people-to-people solidaristic strategy is needed, initially. More successors are needed to the heroic but unsuccessful 'leave the oil in the soil' campaign for Ecuador's Yasuni national park. Launching the strategy in 2007, environmental and Indigenous-rights activists suggested Northern governments pay the Quito government \$3.5 billion to avoid drilling the Amazonian paradise.¹¹ Activists put the 'climate debt down-payment' on the civilised world's agenda.

Sadly, the neoliberals running the German aid ministry killed it, alongside Ecuador's rulers who behind the scenes were already inviting a Chinese oil company to prepare to drill. Instead of directing solidarity climate-debt payments to governments that cannot be trusted, should the recipients not be people like Mam Khuluse?

¹ For a review of some movements fighting to leave the oil in the soil see: <http://www.ejolt.org/2013/05/how-to-yasunize-the-world-dont-burn-the-unburnable-fuels/>

But in South Africa, political will is nearly nil – something that must change. So we join with communities in Fuleni, conservationists protecting white rhinos, environmental justice activists, and forward-thinking trade unionists like the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa. A ‘Million Climate Jobs’ campaign has already been launched to find a just transition for so many Eskom coal or BHP Billiton smelter workers who can contribute to our society’s renewable energy instead of to climate change.

The challenge to coal companies to leave the coal in the hole seems like a losing battle if it is only to be waged by economically poor women in rural areas who are disadvantaged by traditional patriarchy and a

lack of resources to fight this battle. Still, hope now rises that the Fuleni campaign will inspire more climate activists and many more ordinary citizens who do not like seeing such extreme environmental injustice along the lines of race, gender and class.

While toppling a Cecil John Rhodes statue in a symbolic way is excellent for the psyche of all of us, the next step must be toppling his deep-rooted legacy. There is no more obvious place where RhodesMustFall than in what is termed the Minerals-Energy Complex. That complex is epitomised by the way coal destroys Fuleni communities, Hluhluwe-iMfolozi’s rhino conservation, and the world’s climate.

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