

State of alert declared as unrest spreads in South Africa

By Chris Marsden
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The South African army has been put on a state of high alert amidst an escalating strike wave involving platinum and gold miners.

The pretext for the alert, the first since the end of apartheid in 1994, was an announcement that Julius Malema was to address a meeting of soldiers in order to hear their grievances. Malema is the expelled youth leader of the African National Congress and the most prominent factional opponent of President Jacob Zuma.

Malema has sought to utilize the widespread anger among miners towards the leadership of the ANC and its trade union partners in the National Union of Mineworkers and the COSATU federation to advance his own challenge for leadership of the ANC. Yesterday he shifted focus to troops angry over cutbacks.

The troops he met were suspended from the South African National Defence Force (SANDF) after rioting in the capital, Pretoria, in 2009 to protest poor salaries and working conditions. They were met with rubber bullets and teargas.

But any move against Malema could be the beginning of a general clampdown under conditions where the NUM and the governing coalition of the ANC, COSATU and the South African Communist Party (SACP) have portrayed unrest in the mines as a conspiracy, with Malema and the breakaway Association of Mineworkers and Construction Union (AMCU) at its centre.

Defence Minister Nosiviwe Mapisa-Nqakula accused Malema of trying to “mobilise against the state”. She noted that he had been touring mines since the massacre of 34 miners at Marikana on August 16. “They are all indications that this is counterrevolutionary,” she said.

She linked the agitation of “members of the SANDF” to “what has happened in Marikana, which is what has happened in the mining industry amongst those workers” and warned soldiers attending the Malema address that there would be consequences if they did not report for

work Wednesday.

More than 40,000 miners are now involved in strike action that is increasingly bitter and militant.

The walkout at Lonmin’s Marikana mine started August 10, involving 3,000 rock drillers. But now strikes to demand a living wage have hit platinum and gold output in many mines. Workers at Marikana continue their strike, with only 1.8 percent of the workforce scabbing. A corpse was found Tuesday near the mine, with deep machete wounds in the back of the head.

The death toll at Marikana now stands at 45, including two mine security guards burned alive in their car and six shop stewards of the National Union of Mineworkers. The NUM is regarded as a company union, with its top personnel raking off a share of the spoils from the brutal exploitation of their own members and all miners.

On Tuesday, 8,000 striking miners and supporters marched to a hospital to see some of the 190 Marikana miners beaten and tortured in police custody. They were blocked by a phalanx of police and armored cars and told that the patients had all been evacuated. The miners are reported to have been tortured in order to implicate Malema as the hidden hand behind their strike.

According to *The Mail & Guardian*, the Independent Police Investigative Directorate is probing allegations of police assaults at five police stations, but was unaware of the torture claim. North West police deputy commissioner Lieutenant General William Mpenbe has been accused of being present when miners were assaulted in custody. He was one of 10 police officers accused of visiting police stations where the miners were held after the Marikana massacre and trying to force them not to lay complaints against the police and to confess.

About 94 cases of assault have been opened against police and many more affidavits have been taken. “In some cases, the alleged victims were beaten so badly that they were unable to open their eyes,” the M&G reports.

At Gold Fields' KDC west mine, 15,000 struck Monday.

Yesterday, Anglo American Platinum (Amplats), the world's biggest platinum producer, suspended operations at four of its mines in South Africa's North West province—the same area as Marikana, owned by British-based Lonmin, the third biggest platinum producer.

On Tuesday night, "Around 1,000 mineworkers had a confrontation with mine security ... at the Siphumelele shaft and the situation has spread to other mine shafts this morning," regional police spokesman Thulani Ngubane said.

On Wednesday, strikers armed with machetes shut down other Amplats operations. A column of at least 1,500 marchers confronted riot police backed by armored vehicles at the gates of the Bathopele shaft near Rustenburg.

"All of us, we're going to close all the operations, starting from Rustenburg. We'll go even to the gold mines to stop the operations," one marcher told Reuters.

One said of the NUM, "All they know is to put the money in their pockets."

On Tuesday, Malema told thousands of miners gathered in a soccer field at the west section of Gold Fields International's KDC gold mine in Carletonville, west of Johannesburg, "There must be a national strike at all the mines until (National Union of Mineworkers' Secretary-General) Frans Baleni and the union's leadership step down with immediate effect."

He said this would be a rolling programme of action, five days each month, to make the mines "ungovernable" through peaceful means until demands for a R12,500 wage are met.

Malema accused Baleni of making a million rand every year from sitting on the boards of mines, adding, "The mines are paying millions of rands of protection money into Jacob Zuma's trust accounts."

"Zuma doesn't care about the workers. He doesn't care about you. Our leaders are in bed with the capitalists," he said.

COSATU responded by condemning Malema for "playing with fire", while the NUM urged "all its loyal members to reject Malema's hogwash and to return to work."

Malema was expelled from the ANC in April. He has won popular support by demanding the nationalization of the mining industry and denouncing Zuma and NUM leader Frans Baleni as stooges of the mining corporations.

But Malema too is a corrupt millionaire, who wants nothing more than to secure the dominance of his faction of the black bourgeoisie in future dealings with the global corporations.

COSATU is right in one thing only: Malema is indeed playing with fire. He is seeking to utilize popular discontent to secure re-admittance to the ANC and for his former patron Zuma to be ousted at the December conference of the party in Mangaung. Earlier this week, Malema made his overtures to no less than COSATU General Secretary Zwelinzima Vavi, telling *The Mail & Guardian*, "I have nothing against Vavi and will always support and defend him as a brother and comrade... We speak one language with him."

Police say they are getting close to arresting Malema for fraud. He told *The Mail & Guardian* last week that he had been handed a police report that indicated "imminent arrest".

Warrants for his arrest have been issued over alleged fraud and corruption in relation to the issuing of government tenders and he possibly faces further charges of tax evasion following an investigation by the South African Revenue Service.

Such highly selective action, singling Malema out from the many criminals within the ANC, is so blatantly political that it could backfire on its authors—adding fuel to the fire now raging in South Africa.

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