

# Unfolding environmental disaster

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BY: AFRICAN NEWS AGENCY

A security company responsible for safeguarding a gold treatment plant belonging to Mintails on the West Rand withdrew last week, citing “financial constraints”. The evacuation, which follows the liquidation of the embattled mining company and its subsidiaries, has left the door wide open to zama-zamas and looters, who are plundering the facility and driving their stash off the premises by the bakkie load. “This is wholesale looting and scavenging of anything of value from copper cables to sheets of metal,” warned environmental activist **Mariette Liefferink**. “The site is under the control of heavily armed [illegal] miners who control all access to the plant.”

Watching the activity from a distance, the men and women carrying tools and blowtorches clearly know what they are doing, creating the impression that this is organised crime. This past weekend climbers, equipped with ropes, scaled the infrastructure of the upper plant.

“Steel construction was falling like nobody’s business,” said an eyewitness. “The liquidators appear to have lost all interest in securing these assets.”

## **GUNFIGHTS**

The situation has descended into anarchy. The looters are not shy to shoot and in the past week, there have been several gunfights when looters felt security or outsiders were encroaching on “their” site.

Even the police are scared to intervene. According to witnesses, the authorities have done nothing given the dangers and the large numbers of looters at the facility.

“The Hawks have been fearful to get involved with the result that this is now a free-for-all. The looting continues with no enforcement whatsoever,” said Liefferink.

She said the most worrying aspect of the looting was the cutting and stealing of a neighbouring electrical cable to Shaft 9 – this cable powers the pump station that removes acid mine water out of the shaft and into a nearby acid mine drainage treatment plant. Millions of litres of water are pumped daily to prevent the acid mine water reaching the surface and decanting into the surrounding Cradle of Humankind.

**Sputnik Ratau**, the spokesperson for the Department of Water and Sanitation, confirmed that the cable was sabotaged and stolen on 24 May.

“Power to the Western Basin acid mine drainage (AMD) pump station, on Mintails’s property, and the AMD Treatment Plant is thus compromised and the facility is currently not operational,” said Ratau.

“If the pumping stops for a prolonged period, like a month, we run the risk of a decant of toxic and radioactive acid mine water into the surrounding Cradle of Humankind.”

The underlying rock structure in the Cradle is porous dolomite and the acid mine water could dissolve the rock, destroying valuable fossils in this Unesco World Heritage site, which is internationally recognised for its hominid finds.

This would have serious implications for tourism in the area and would inevitably mean job losses.

“Especially for Bolt’s Farm and the Sterkfontein Caves that contain our most precious fossils and we will see an acceleration in the number of sinkholes forming as a result,” said Liefferink.

### **SERIOUS RISK**

Many of the residents along the water system would be affected by a decant – their water would be contaminated and their health put at serious risk because they do not have access to municipal water.

“The people there are dependent on the water systems for their drinking water, for their animals and for irrigation,” says Liefferink.

The pump station was established by the Department of Water and Sanitation in response to a potential decant.

According to Liefferink, in 2002 the western basin in the area where the mine is situated flooded, leaving acid mine water to flow out with devastating consequences. It resulted in the Tweelopies Spruit and Wonderfontein Spruit becoming radioactive hotspots and acutely toxic, putting lives downstream at risk.

“The Department of Water and Sanitation declared it an emergency. They refurbished the treatment plant which pumps and processes around 40-million litres of acid mine water a day,” said Liefferink.

Her other worry is that the gold treatment plant is the only real asset left and this wholesale looting does not augur well for the recovery of the R460-million environmental liability that Mintails left on the West Rand. This amount was cited in the Parliamentary portfolio committee report by the Department of Minerals and Energy last year.

But the Department of Water and Sanitation said there was no immediate risk of raw AMD decanting. “The water level in the void is around 9-metres below the surface and this is considered ample buffer capacity for now,” said Ratau.

He added that the Trans-Caledon Tunnel Authority (TCTA), a State-owned entity charged with financing and implementing bulk raw water infrastructure projects, is working closely with Sibanye-Stillwater and Eskom to restore the cable. This could be achieved by as early as Tuesday (June 4). Alternative interventions are also being costed so as to achieve a permanent remedy and for armed security personnel to be deployed at the pump station to deter future attempts of cable theft or other damage to the pump station. ❏