



**REMARKS BY THE HONOURABLE
MINISTER OF MINERAL RESOURCES AND ENERGY
MR GWEDE MANTASHE (MP)
ON THE OCCASION OF THE MINE SAFE VIRTUAL CONFERENCE
25 NOVEMBER 2021**

Programme Director

Leadership of organised business

Leadership of organised labour – the NUM, AMCU, UASA and Solidarity

Professional Associations – AMMSA, SACMA and SAIMM

Equipment Supplier Representatives

Representatives of MHSC and MQA

Team DMRE

Ladies and gentlemen

Allow me to express my profound gratitude for having been afforded an opportunity to participate in the Mine Safe Conference focusing on an aspect that is key to the success of every mining operation - ***that being occupational health and safety in the mining sector***. This brings vivid memories of the battles we have waged to ensure the health and safety of mineworkers.

Today marks a year since the last Occupational Health and Safety Tripartite Summit. It is also by no coincidence that from today, as a country we will be joining the world in the campaign for 16 Days of Activism against Women and Children Abuse.

Government continues to be guided by the standpoint that the loss of life of workers in the mining sector is unacceptable and must be stopped immediately. The pain and suffering experienced by families of the mineworkers who have lost their loved ones due to mine fatal accidents and diseases could have and must be avoided.

As we gather here today, I'm confident that we will genuinely reflect on the current state of health and safety in our mining sector. No stone must be left unturned towards ensuring the occupational health and safety of workers.

The mining of minerals in South Africa remains one of the crucial driving forces of the economy and major source of livelihoods for many families. But this reality can never override the importance of the health and safety of workers as a human right. We know in some parts of the continent where some mining corporates continue to do as they please. We surely cannot claim to be better when there are many incidents of violations of our occupational health and safety standards. Instead, we should be moving towards forging solidarity with our fellow African countries against the impunities of labour exploitation at all costs.

It is important to appreciate that mining is doing well this year in terms of its contribution to the economy. However, in terms of mine health and safety, it is not doing well. That is a contradiction that must be addressed. We equally need to focus on the health and safety aspect of our industry.

Various Covid-19 lockdown restrictions and regulations were introduced since March 2020 in South Africa and throughout the world, mainly to save lives and protect livelihoods. We have since then been equipped with the necessary knowledge, prepared for the unknown and weighed out our options on how to deal with the possible consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic on our health and safety systems and the economy.

The pandemic has reminded us as a nation that we are stronger working together. We must all work together to defeat the virus, accelerate the recovery of our economy, implement economic reforms to create sustainable jobs and drive inclusive growth.

MINE HEALTH AND SAFETY

The health and safety of mineworkers continue to be a priority for government, hence various pieces of legislation were enacted to address challenges relating to the Occupational Health and Safety performance of the mining industry.

The latest statistics and reports on occupational health matters at mines demonstrates that some employees are still exposed to occupational hazards which exceed the occupational exposure limit, and this should remain a concern to all of us.

Pulmonary Tuberculosis and Noise Induced Hearing Loss remain a great concern particularly in the gold, platinum, and coal sectors. Silicosis is still of concern in the gold sector where crystalline silica is most prevalent. The silicosis novice cases from the gold mines require an in-depth investigation in line with provisions under the Mine Health and Safety Act (MHSA). Lastly, non-communicable diseases, including cardiovascular diseases, cancers, chronic respiratory diseases, and diabetes further exacerbate the disease burden we already have in our industry.

We need to continuously prevent and manage all these health issues, as they affect our workforce average work life expectancy. We end up losing crucial resources because of medical incapacitation and mine deaths.

It is again with regret that the sector continues to experience fatalities and injuries which can be prevented. The provisional number of reported fatalities and injuries for 2021 stands at 58 and 1 810, respectively. It is further disappointing that since the last Occupational Health and Safety Tripartite Summit in November 2020, the mining sector has unfortunately reported 67 deaths and over 2 000 injuries due to accidents.

Surely, we cannot say things are in order when the corrective measures that have been taken palpably demonstrate minimal impact as workers continue to die in this industry. One life lost is one too many. We must aim for Zero Harm in the industry.

All employers should now walk the talk. We cannot condone poor compliance with mine standards as this leads to the loss of lives. Mining companies must take the necessary steps to save lives.

Many of these incidents are repeats and they can be prevented. Fall of Ground accidents remain the largest accident category and the predominant cause of fatalities followed by general accident and transportation categories respectively.

This is regrettable as it is expected that all mines should have appropriate measures and expertise to enhance the health and safety of miners. So, we urge you to go back to the drawing board and constantly focus on safety performance. This should be extended to include the safety of women employees who also have a right to be employed in our mines. This is even more highlighted by the campaign of 16 Days of Activism Against Women and Child Abuse. Women must feel safe in their homes, on the streets, at work and everywhere.

In actioning all these steps you need to have more platforms to share good experiences and develop programmes for the benefit of this industry. As I have indicated, occupational health and safety issues will only find practical expression when we make them part of our daily work routines. They must be as important to both the employer and the employee as the actual extraction of minerals from beneath the soil. The two must be considered two faces of the same coin.

The Department will continue embarking on interventions which include among others the following:

- Engaging Union Leadership, CEOs and Boards of Directors of different mining houses to enhance the concerted efforts in the eradication of mine deaths.
- Stoppage of unsafe mines to ensure that employers take appropriate measures that will prevent harm to the mine employees.
- Enforcing and monitoring of health and safety at mines through focused inspections and audits to be escalated during the remaining period of 2021 and beyond.
- Ensure that safe mining practices are adopted given that a significant number of accidents occurred whilst opening or mining in old areas.
- Ensure that all mines collaborate with inspectors and organized labour to have health and safety days and campaigns to raise awareness about the importance of adhering to health and safety protocols.
- Promote and support effective measures to mitigate Covid-19 including the roll-out of Vaccination programmes.

Mineworkers are also urged not to risk their lives because of production bonuses. We need to collectively adopt the fundamental stance that if mines cannot mine safely then they should not mine at all until the necessary measures have been put in place to protect the lives of all mineworkers.

We remain steadfast in our goal of attaining *zero harm* in the sector and call on all stakeholders to work with us in protecting our mineworkers. We are disturbed by the complaints we continue to receive from workers who are intimidated or victimized whilst exercising their rights to withdraw or refuse to work under dangerous environments.

Allow me to remind every worker and employer that mineworkers have a right to refuse dangerous work and to leave a dangerous working space. I call on all companies, to work with organised labour, to ensure that mineworkers have appropriate knowledge, skills and support to exercise their rights to withdraw or refuse to work under dangerous conditions. As government, we will take as serious offence where a mining company refuses to attend to incidents of safety but instead forces workers to continue working.

Now that we have entered the festive season, we urge all mineworkers and mining companies to remain cautious to hazardous and dangerous working conditions. The increase in fatalities and injuries during this period is mainly attributed to production pressures associated with performance incentives; poor supervision; anxiety of the festive season; lack of focus and complacency. I wish to remind all workers that no production bonus is worth a life. Shift fatigue management systems must be implemented and be continuously monitored.

The health and safety of mineworkers is everyone's responsibility and I believe that working together we can attain the goal of Zero Harm in the sector. As we reflect and engage today on the state of occupational health and safety in the mining sector, let us also keep in mind that the long-term sustainability of mining is dependant not only on its growth, competitiveness, and transformation, but also on how well its workforce is cared for.

I trust that all said and done, the mining sector will continue to be a bedrock of the South African economy. As we endeavour to ensure that it continues to be a leading industry and a contributor to our GDP, we must nonetheless not lose sight of the ball on safety.

This industry is composed of all the minerals. When coal sector is under siege, it the responsibility of the industry to add content and context to the "just" transition.

Let me conclude by extending our condolences to the families of all the workers who lost their lives in our sector, including those who passed on because of COVID-19 related complications. A speedy recovery to those mineworkers who unfortunately got injured due to mine accidents or have fallen sick because of occupational health diseases and the Covid-19 pandemic.

We further wish to urge all workers to remain vigilant. We must all continue to follow the health protocols set by government as well as our employers. Let us all continue to support and promote the vaccination roll-out programmes, wear masks, wash our hands regularly or sanitise, avoid crowded spaces and maintain social distancing, and above all take the job to save lives.

I thank you.