



Mphatheleni Makaulule is the leader of the Dzomo La Mupo (Voice of Nature) environmental group. They are protesting against the Coal of Africa Limited mine near Tshipise in Limpopo || PHOTOS: LUCKY NXUMALO

# Black gold versus blue water

## Residents come together to fight new coal mine

YOLANDI GROENEWALD  
yolandi.groenewald@citypress.co.za

"There is a huge fight coming," says Jonathan Mudimeli, chairperson of the Mudimeli Royal Council.

"Our community will be surrounded by a mine and no one is talking to us."

Mudimeli, with a delegation that includes the chief of the Mudimelis, is in Polokwane at the department of mineral resources in Limpopo.

They're here to challenge Coal of Africa's new mine north of Makhado, near Tshipise.

"We are extremely concerned about our water. We are struggling at the moment.

"What will we do when they start mining?" asks Mudimeli. "We are scared about losing our livelihoods."

Coal of Africa's mining project has started a water war in the water scarce Soutpansberg.

The director of the Federation for a Sustainable Development, Dr Koos Pretorius, describes the Soutpansberg as having rainfall equivalent to the Kalahari.

But the Soutpansberg also has some of the best quality coal in the country, which is needed to produce steel for Coal's client ArcelorMittal.

The problem is water. Coal houses need huge amounts of water to wash the coal and keep coal dust pollution to a minimum.

"We have heard about this coal dust," says a worried Mudimeli, whose village is right in the middle of the proposed Makhado mine. "It creates black lung disease."

Mudimeli and his delegation are not alone in Polokwane. Farmers and residents from Makhado crowd the halls.

"This fight is across all race



Children from Mudimeli village in Limpopo queue at the water tap in the street. Their village's water supply will be affected by the Coal of Africa Limited mine

lines. This is everyone's water that will be affected," says Wally Schultz, a farmer in the area.

There is no chance to present their objections, though: the hearing is postponed to next month, a decision that upsets everyone including Coal of Africa.

The Australian mining house desperately wants to get its mine going. It was fined R9.2 million for environmental transgressions after being raided by the Green Scorpions in 2010. Its share price has fallen dramatically, and the Makhado mine represents a chance to get rid of some of its debt.

The next day, some of the water warriors meet again, at the old hotel in Tshipise for a water workshop hosted by Coal of Africa.

The workshop is packed and the green shirts of Dzomo La Mupo (Voice of Nature), a new Venda environmental group, dominate the room.

The group, made up mostly of

women, is not popular with Coal of Africa.

The company's chief executive John Wallington even suggested legal action against the group if it continued to oppose the mine. A member of the Coal of Africa delegation at the meeting described the group as "a circus".

During the presentations it emerges that the Mudimeli's borehole water will be affected.

But Coal of Africa's environmental consultant Mias van der Walt says Coal will pay for new connections for water for every Mudimeli household and all private boreholes will be connected to the community distribution system, at a cost of R6 million. There is some support for the mine – one man says he has consulted his ancestors, and they believe it's right to back the project.

Tsholomono Prince of Mandiwana village tells City Press he supports the mine because it will create job opportunities for his

people. He keeps quiet during the meeting.

Another resident, Mphatheleni Makaulule, is extremely vocal. She asks repeatedly where the water for the project will come from.

Currently, in phase one of the project, Coal of Africa will use a water licence that uses groundwater.

When that expires in two years' time, they will have to apply for a bulkwater licence from the department of water affairs. Nobody can say for sure where that water will come from.

Van der Walt says there are three bulkwater options at the moment: getting water from the Limpopo River, using treated sewerage or getting water from the Nzhelele dam. But the dam's water is overcommitted and the mine will have to buy water rights from farmers in the area.

"Coal of Africa is negotiating with farmers in the area," says Van der Walt.

Local farmer Francis Nicholson is incensed by this.

"How can you start a multimillion-rand project when you can't even say for sure where the water will come from?" he asks.

Eugene O' Brien, the project manager at the Makhado mine, tries to calm the tempers.

"We have given this commitment and guarantee that we will not take water to the detriment of any community or farmer without compensation," he says.

The meeting ends. Dzomo La Mupo and several residents refuse to leave.

"These issues are about life and death," says Makaulule. "This is a fight to the death."

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