

Media briefing on steel plant fire gets the axe

QUESTIONS around the impact of and operational solutions to the fire that ravaged ArcelorMittal South Africa's Vanderbijlpark plant on February 9 went begging yesterday as the company's chief executive, Nonkululeko Nyembezi-Heita, pulled out of a scheduled teleconference in which she was expected to give a detailed update.

ArcelorMittal SA gave no indication of why the teleconference had been postponed, other than to say that the chief executive had pressing commitments and that the damage assessment was taking a long time.

"We will send an updated invitation as soon as we can," the company said.

Deon Reyneke, the head of Solidarity's metal, engineering and electrical industry unit, said yesterday that the fire broke out after molten steel started running uncontrollably from a basic oxygen furnace, which caused several blazes.

"It caused major damage and a long recovery process will now have to be followed to get that section of the plant operational again," he said.

The Gauteng Department of Agriculture and Rural Development had earlier issued an order against ArcelorMittal SA, requiring it to switch off its electric arc furnace at the Vanderbijlpark plant.

"Operations at this plant have now largely ground to a halt," Reyneke said.

The union appealed to the regulator to withdraw the order so that ArcelorMittal SA could resume operations at the plant, thereby preventing job losses.

ArcelorMittal SA has previously given the assurance that its workers' jobs would not be affected. – Dineo Faku