

Black South African excellence rolling out amid sea of platinum turmoil

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RUSTENBURG (miningweekly.com) – The technical excellence of upcoming black South Africans is being laudably implemented amid a sea of turmoil in South Africa's wildcat strike-ravaged Rustenburg platinum belt.

The beacon of hope within the area where 45 people have died in recent violent confrontations is the promising platinum project of the black-owned, black-managed and black-operated Royal Bafokeng Platinum's (RBPlat's) fast-developing Styldrift 1 project near Sun City.

RBPlat's homegrown Styldrift GM Velile Nhlapo, who presented the project merits to mining analysts and the media, said it was fitting that airtime be afforded to what was a spectacular R11.8-billion project that was ahead of schedule and below budget, against the backdrop of the tragic recent events at some of Rustenburg's platinum mines, which had hit the global headlines.

"We are building a project here that will have a life-of-mine of over 40 years," Nhlapo said, emphasising the long-term nature of mining coupled to the deep-seated belief that normality was destined to return to the strife-torn area.

"It's something fantastic, we've done well on this site," he added.

The project team has managed to intersect the rich Merensky reef one month ahead of schedule on a project that is tracking at a remarkable R323-million below budget.

Besides developing the mine, the RBPlat team is hard at work developing the community as well.

A community training intervention is under way in partnership with global mining equipment company Sandvik, which enrolls people with a standard eight.

The trainees, from communities living on the doorstep of the mine, will emerge work-ready in two years time as artisans and operators in the employ of RBPlat, a far cry from the legacy of the mines of the past drawing their labour from impoverished rural areas and those of South Africa's immediate neighbours to work and live in single-sex hostels for months on end before being allowed to return home on leave.

RBPlat employees live in houses in nearby villages with their families, but this makes it difficult to safeguard employees during periods of worker unrest.

The project is currently standing on 30% local employment.

Mechanised bord-and-pillar mining in stoping heights of 1.8 m to 2 m will take place in a trackless 250-vehicle environment, with the venture employing 3 200 people as a mechanised operation, with the employment complement rising to 5 000 in 2023 when the conventional mining section is included.

Production will begin in 2015, reach steady state in 2018 and continue at 320 000 oz a year until 2058.

"This project creates hope even when there is darkness," said RBPlat CEO Steve Phiri.