

# Pondo king gives minister ultimatum

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**P**ONDO King Mpondombini Sigcau has "instructed" Minerals and Energy Minister Buyelwa Sonjica to set aside, within 10 days, her approval of the heavy mineral excavations planned by Australian mining company Mineral Resource Commodities (MRC) on the Wild Coast.

"He has given me an ultimatum of 10 days to respond," said Sonjica, after publicly acknowledging that the consultation process for the Xolobeni Mineral Sands Project had been "flawed" and surrounded by allegations of bribery.

This follows Sonjica's meeting on Friday with representatives of the king's Qaukeni Traditional Council and of the Amadiba Crisis Committee, which was formed last year to represent the interests of people directly affected by the

planned titanium mining along a 22km stretch of coastal dunes south of Port Edward.

About 350 people turned up to voice concerns about Sonjica's decision to award a licence without consulting them. Speaking to the *Sunday Tribune* afterwards, Sonjica said she had been unaware of the extent of the resistance to the mining.

"I was misled into believing just a few individuals opposed it," said Sonjica.

"I don't know what you would call it, but a mistake was made, of not consulting properly, not by us as a department, but by MRC. We need to correct that," said Sonjica.

"There are also allegations of bribery – that members of the community were bribed with cars and money to support mining," said Sonjica.

"I agreed with them (the Amadiba Crisis Committee) that the consultation process



RESIDENTS who stand to lose their homes to Xolobeni Mineral Sands Project voiced their protest when Minerals and Energy Minister Buyelwa Sonjica visited the area on Friday

Picture: YVETTE DESCHAMPS

was flawed," said Sonjica.

"But I am not saying we are withdrawing or suspending the licence."

"The position we (the department) have taken is that mining can co-exist with

tourism through good environmental management.

"But any eventuality will now be guided by the king and what the people agree to," said Sonjica.

She said she planned to

meet King Sigcau before making any further announcements or a decision on the king's recommendation that an independent inquiry be held into the flawed consultation process and the associated allegations of bribery.

Sonjica's engagement with the highest traditional authority in Pondoland and the crisis committee follows consultants to the mining project being threatened and chased out of the area.

This was after they had recently started visiting homesteads to obtain information from families to enable resettlement and compensation offers.

Representing the crisis committee, human rights attorney Richard Spoor said the awarding of mining rights before properly consulting such families was "absurd" and a "dangerous thing to do", particularly in areas such as Pondoland, where people felt

protective about their land rights and cultural way of life.

He also criticised Sonjica's reluctance to suspend the mining rights after publicly conceding that such consultations had not taken place.

"Her decisions affect these people's properties, their land rights, environment, dignity, existence. How can the minister say such rights are irrelevant?" asked Spoor.

Spoor said that if Sigcau's appeal to Sonjica to suspend the mining licence was not successful, an application would be made to the high court on behalf of the crisis committee to have the mining licence set aside.

The decision not only sidelined objections by the Department of Environmental Affairs, but also ignored the provisional findings of an inquiry by the South African Human Rights Commission that a lack of consultation with

people living in the areas earmarked for mining had led to potentially violent divisions in the area.

Returning from a recent government jamboree organised for Sonjica to announce approval of the Xolobeni Mineral Sands Project, a local headman, Ndabazakhe Baleni, who took part in the festivities, was assaulted.

But this was not connected to Baleni's recent support for the mining, said Sonjica.

"They were just taking food away from him," she said.

Police are also investigating the murder of Sinke Mncwabe, who had recently moved away from the coastal area amid hostilities over the mining, only to be killed in an area further inland, where he was creating a new home.

But tensions persisted in the area, said Sonjica, and this required the intervention of stakeholders.