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Headline:

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SNAKE PARK

VO: In Soweto's Snake Park, Thokozile Mntambo is gearing up for a battle. Her weapons of war?

A laptop and a questionnaire.

THOKO: We went door to door, doing research, asking people how the tailings are actually affecting their health.

VO: Thoko and volunteers from her community are looking for proof that the sicknesses they see here are caused by mine waste — or tailings.

UPSOUND THOKO TALKING TO VOLUNTEERS

THOKO: We interviewed old people who lived in Snake Park... we interviewed people who were living with disabilities. We interviewed parents who have children or having disabilities. We interviewed people who are living with chronic illnesses like asthma and lung cancer...

VO: About a third of all gold ever mined came from South Africa — buried in rocks as deep as three kilometres underground. As the city of Johannesburg grew, a layer of pollution spread over the area. When mining companies had taken all the gold they could, they left behind harmful waste. Things like chemicals and heavy metals, which Thoko believes have impacted her family in Snake Park.

THOKO: My sister gave birth to a child with cerebral palsy. She was staying here for like five years. Her child, she cannot walk even now, she stays at Ellen Glen, the care centre, because now my sister passed away. My mom also passed away because she had breathing problems. My brother has asthma. I'm also asthmatic... every time when I go to the clinic or the hospital, they tell me, do you smoke? I don't smoke, but they can see when they're doing X-ray status, there's a lot of dust in my lungs and stuff. And it's not only happening to me, it's happening to everyone.

VO: The answer is to clean up the dumps. It's what Thoko and her friends tried to do by planting sunflowers that would soak up toxins from the soil. But now they're not allowed on the dump, and the sunflower project has died. The government can't afford to clean up these dumps. Yet, when gold prices go up, companies still come in and try to make money from whatever gold is left. Pan African Resources, listed on the London Stock Exchange, now has a licence to re-mine tailings. Thoko says Pan African — which has barred entry to the dump — hasn't told them what they planning to do to make it safe.

THOKO: And now there comes Pan African they're talking about re-mining... to communities, it's unjust because it's exclusion. So what I want, I want the just transition to be just, because now it's unjust. For it to be just, it must work for everyone.

VO: Thoko volunteers for Bench Marks, a foundation that keeps an eye on multinational companies and their responsibility to local communities. Bench Marks thinks Snake Park is heading for disaster.

ERIC: We have global warming, or this environmental catastrophe that is now happening where you have extreme heat, extreme rains, one of the catastrophes, is for that tailing to break entirely because of the rain. It has broken. It has a crack...

VO: Bench Marks brought in an international expert on tailings dams to say if Snake Park is safe.

ERIC: The person was so devastated to see the conditions of the tailing. And for...so Pan African to be doing something about it... So the worst case scenario with the extreme weather is for that tailing to entirely break into that community...

VO: Pan African Resources told us that rehabilitation plans at the site kicked off in September and independent reports show there's no danger of the tailings dam collapsing.

THOKO: We want change, and we want people to be involved in decision-making... this is how you do it with communities. You don't just come with a jargon of papers and you explain and you expect people who are illiterate to read 100 copies of the environmental assessment plan like it doesn't make sense. Make it simple for communities to understand.

VO: Pan African says it's local government's job to deal with people living so close to the tailings dam. And the company has talked with some community members and is watching dust levels at Snake Park. They plan to do a health check in 2025 to see if there's any risk from radiation.

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