

## DISASTER AT THE COALBROOK NORTH COLLIERY

The tragic disaster that occurred on January 21st, 1960, at the Coalbrook North Colliery of The Clydesdale (Transvaal) Collieries, Limited, and the events which followed upon it, have been reported to Parliament and in the Press.

As the Colliery and the adjoining Coalbrook South Colliery provide the coal supplies for Escom's Taaibos and Highveld Power Stations, the tragedy impinged very closely upon the Escom organization: and Escom desires to take this opportunity of expressing its deep sympathy with those who suffered bereavement and personal loss.

In the normal course Coalbrook North colliery is the sole source of coal supply for Taaibos Power Station, the South Colliery providing the requirements of Highveld Power Station, and as the burning rate at Taaibos Station in the three weeks before the accident exceeded 40,000 tons per week, the loss of the whole output from the North Colliery was a disturbance of considerable magnitude.

Immediate steps were taken to transfer as much load as possible from Taaibos to other power stations, as well as to obtain coal for Taaibos Station from Coalbrook South Colliery, and from the nearby Cornelia Colliery at Vereeniging. At a later stage coal was brought in from the Witbank area; but, as the boilers at Taaibos are designed for burning the type of coal produced from the Vereeniging coalfield, it was necessary for Cornelia coal to be railed to Taaibos, and for the Witbank supplies to be used at Klip and Vereeniging Power Stations.

By these measures the daily units sent out from Taaibos Power Station was reduced from 8·6 millions to 5·5 millions: but without any reduction of supplies to consumers.

The coal contracts with The Clydesdale (Transvaal) Collieries, Limited, provide for supply from the South Colliery to Taaibos Power Station, in an emergency; and within a fortnight of the accident at the North Colliery, Coalbrook South Colliery was able to increase its output to about 40,000 tons per week. This increased production, together with the coal brought in by rail, enabled near-normal loading to be maintained on Taaibos and Highveld Power Stations from the period 18th February, 1960, to 4th March, 1960: although, there was, of course, appreciable encroachment into coal stocks at all power stations.

On 29th February, 1960, mining was recommenced in No. 3 seam at the Coalbrook North Colliery: and there was expectation of a supply of some 7,000 tons per week from this source.

On the 4th March, 1960, Escom was advised that the East Shaft of the Vierfontein Colliery had been closed in the interests of safety, and consequently that the output of the Vierfontein Colliery would be reduced in the ensuing two weeks to 23,000 tons and 25,500 tons, and thereafter to about 27,000 tons per week. To meet this position an immediate change of loading on Vierfontein Power Station was made.

On the morning of 7th March, 1960, the haulage at the Vierfontein Colliery broke down, and caused a stoppage of 32½ hours; and then, in the evening of the same day, Escom was advised that the *ad hoc* Committee on Mine Safety had ordered the closing of the Coalbrook North Colliery.

These events were followed by the closing of the Coalbrook South Colliery on Saturday, 12th March, 1960: and a reduction in electricity supply could not be avoided.

Emergency measures were taken to bring in coal to the southern stations, *i.e.*, Taaibos, Highveld and Vierfontein, by rail and by road, while the maximum possible load was injected from the northern stations into the southern networks. Notwithstanding every effort to avoid load shedding, it was necessary to reduce the supplies to consumers supplied from the southern stations to 80 per cent of normal, from midnight on the 13th March, 1960. Supplies were increased to 85 per cent of normal from 7 a.m. on the 17th March; and normal supplies were restored from 7 a.m. on the 19th March, 1960.

The Coalbrook Collieries re-started production on the 18th March; and by April the position had largely been restored, insofar as the maintenance of full supplies of electricity was concerned.

The simultaneous closing of two and a half collieries supplying power stations which have a total installed capacity of over 1,000,000 kW is surely without precedent: and the fact that reductions of supply to the consumers fed from those stations was no more than 20 per cent for three days, and 15 per cent for two days, must surely be a ground for assurance rather than alarm.

Escom is not unaware, of course, of the losses suffered by consumers as a result of interruptions of electricity supply. The emergency measures taken to secure coal supplies by rail and road were costly, and coal costs on the Undertakings which are supplied from the Transvaal and Orange Free State pooled power stations have been increased and are likely to remain higher than normal throughout the current year: but additional rail facilities are being provided at all pit-head power stations for receiving coal in emergency, and it is hoped that there will not be any further instance of reduction of supply due to loss of coal supplies.

*In conclusion, Escom desires to express appreciation for the co-operation and assistance rendered by the South African Railways, the Transvaal and Orange Free State Chamber of Mines, the Transvaal Coal Owner's Association, and by all consumers who responded to the request for curtailment of loading during the emergency.*