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COMPANY COMMENT: Business France; safety stoppages

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Desk seeks to sell SA firms on French skills while safety stoppages in era of advanced mine safety create indefensible costs

FRANCE put her best foot forward on Tuesday, launching an "Invest in France!" initiative at ENSafrica headquarters in Sandton. Numerous speakers extolled the country's magnificent connections to the rest of Europe, and spoke of the economic benefits of more than 44% of people aged between 25 and 34 being graduates of one sort or another.

Most pertinently, national economic development agency Business France has opened a desk in SA that provides free and confidential services to aspiring investors in France. Steinhoff and Aspen are there in a big way, but they are among only 30 domestic companies invested in France, compared with 350 French companies invested in SA, employing 30,000 people.

Many French companies in SA are well known, including Alstom, which is partnering the Passenger Rail Agency of SA to build rolling stock, and Areva (previously Framatome), which designed the Koeberg nuclear power plant. Both are embroiled in public disputes over these respective contracts, but that is common currency in multibillion-rand business dealings.

Business France says it will help prospective South African investors connect with lawyers, accountants, banks, real estate agencies, and personnel and recruitment services in France. It has information on subsidies across the country, and will organise business scouting missions and after-sales troubleshooting.

Stavros Nicolaou, Aspen's senior executive for strategic trade, says France's cost-competitiveness on skills outweighs its notoriously demanding trade unions.

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EVERY now and then a brave mining CEO sticks his head above the parapet to point out something irksome about the Department of Mineral Resources. It's a rare event, though — the regulator is notoriously thin-skinned and reacts badly to criticism. The department denies targeting complainers, but it has been said too often by too many various people for it not to have an element of truth.

The matter of department-ordered safety stoppages is a particularly troublesome and sensitive matter. A leaked Chamber of Mines document estimated the stoppages have cost just 60% of its members R13.6bn since 2012, despite a remarkable improvement in safety since then, with last year the best performance on fatalities and this year delivering a further 21% improvement so far.

Philip Kotze, an outspoken former CEO of platinum producer Anoroaq Resources, said four years ago, the issue had become "a bit ridiculous", with stoppages to correct minor infringements like a tick not appearing next to a signature on a safety declaration form.

The industry simply cannot afford such pettiness.

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