

Rights Group Blasts Chinese Mines in Zambia

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LUSAKA, Zambia (AP) — Copper-rich Zambia's new president should back up his anti-Chinese rhetoric with steps to ensure workers at Chinese-owned mines in this southern African country are safe and adequately paid, Human Rights Watch said Thursday.

In a 122-page report, "'You'll Be Fired If You Refuse': Labor Abuses in Zambia's Chinese State-owned Copper Mines," the international rights watchdog said that despite improvements in recent years, safety and labor conditions at Chinese owned mines are worse than at other foreign-owned mines, and Chinese mine managers often violate government regulations.

Complaints about Chinese business practices in Zambia stretch back years and often are pointed to as examples of problems with Chinese investors across Africa. In 2005, an explosion at a Chinese-owned factory in northern Zambia killed 51 Zambian workers. Last year, two Chinese managers were accused of shooting coal miners during a labor dispute. Months later, the mine agreed to pay compensation to 13 injured workers, and attempted murder charges against the managers were dropped.

Michael Sata, who won presidential elections in September, had for years tried to win votes by stirring up anti-Chinese sentiment. With copper prices booming and many Zambians grateful for Chinese jobs and investment, Sata, who had lost three previous presidential votes, toned down the rhetoric in his successful campaign. But he is still known as a champion of the poor.

"Sata's stated commitments to protect workers' rights are encouraging," Human Rights Watch said Thursday. "But simply demanding that Chinese companies improve their practices is insufficient if not accompanied by more effective regulation of the mines."

In Beijing, Foreign Ministry spokesman Hong Lei said the report did not accurately reflect what was happening.

"The conclusions reached by Human Rights Watch are inconsistent with the facts," Hong told a regular news conference.

He said Chinese companies had brought great benefits to Zambia and that systems were in place to protect the safety and rights of workers there, and that Chinese companies were meeting their social responsibilities.

Over the weekend, Sata held a lunch for Chinese businesspeople in Zambia, telling them previous governments had not done enough to make clear what obligations the Chinese should meet. Sata has appointed former Zambian President Kenneth

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Kaunda, a respected elder statesman, as his special envoy to China.

"When you give the Chinese a project without specifications, don't blame the Chinese," Sata said at the lunch. "Blame yourself."

Sata has proposed more than doubling the minimum wage, now at 419,000 kwacha (about \$90) a month, and tightening safety and other workplace regulations. His legislative proposals have not yet come up for parliamentary votes.

HRW called for improvements at the government department that oversees mine safety, saying it lacked staff and money and was plagued by corruption allegations. The rights group also called for higher fines to be imposed for safety violations. And it said there was reason to believe government pressure would work.

"There is no question that since first beginning operations, the Chinese-run companies have improved health and safety conditions as well as union relationships," HRW said.

It added that while the Chinese are still much worse than other mining companies in Zambia, "the improvements make clear that there is neither an inherent link between Chinese investment and poor labor practices nor a complete inflexibility on their part. Indeed, they appear responsive to pressure from host governments and care greatly about their image."

Thursday's rights report included a detailed response from the China Non-Ferrous Metals Mining Corporation, which runs four mines in Zambia. The company, overseen by the Chinese government, denied most of HRW's allegations, saying that in some cases "language and cultural differences ... could have possibly resulted in misunderstandings about the actual state of affairs."

The company's chairman in Zambia, Tao Xinghu, was at Sata's weekend lunch, and said then that Chinese companies in Zambia would obey the law and increase their investments. Tao is also president of the Association of Chinese Corporations in Zambia. China's ambassador to Zambia, Zhou Yuxiao, promised at the lunch that his country could give Zambia loans and grants for farming, health, education and other projects. Zhou said total trade between the two countries was \$2.8 billion in 2010 and that China's total trade investment in Zambia now stands at \$5 billion.

HRW researchers interviewed 95 miners from the four Chinese copper operations in Zambia in November, 2010 and July, 2011. Researchers also interviewed 48 miners from operations run by other foreign companies, as well as Chinese managers, union and government officials, and medical workers.

Canadian, Indian, South African and Swiss entrepreneurs are among those who invested in Zambian mines along with the Chinese when the sector was privatized in 1997.

Miners at Chinese operations interviewed by HRW described working 12-hour shifts — the law limits shifts to eight hours — exposed to acid, fumes and dust. They

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complained about not being compensated for overtime as the law requires, and receiving much lower pay than other foreign companies offer. Workers also said Chinese managers were slow to replace company-issued boots, hard hats, respirators and other safety equipment.

Workers said they were threatened with dismissal if they refused to work in dangerous conditions. Outspoken union representatives faced retaliation, and workers' rights to join the country's main union were violated by Chinese managers, the report said.

Doctors and nurses in mining towns spoke to HRW of a surge in accidents since Chinese companies took over some mines, amid concerns Chinese managers are not reporting all accidents as the government requires.

"While accidents are not unique to the Chinese-owned mines, union officials, miners who had worked in Chinese and non-Chinese operations, and even government representatives who spoke to Human Rights Watch all said that the Chinese copper operations were the worst for health and safety conditions," the report said.

Matt Wells, the main researcher on the HRW report, said mining operations in Zambia have seen between 15 and 21 deaths each year from 2006-2010. With such a small sample, Wells said in an email to The Associated Press, HRW was reluctant to try to compare deaths at Chinese-run operations with those at other operations.

Geoffrey Crothall of the China Labor Bulletin said what HRW describes in Zambia is unsurprising to those familiar with working conditions in China.

"There's still no real culture of safety in Chinese mines, it's still very much profit first, and that's why you see a high rate of accidents," said Crothall, whose independent group lobbies for workers' rights in China.

Associated Press writers Donna Bryson in Johannesburg and Gillian Wong in Beijing contributed to this report.

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