



Written by [Daniel Sayani](#) on November 7, 2011

Chinese Human Rights Abuses in Zambia on the Rise

Communist China has long been seeking to increase its influence over the Middle East and Sub-Saharan Africa, whether through economic, industrial, diplomatic, or militaristic means, as part of its gambit for geopolitical dominance. Part of this overall mission has been the establishment of formal ties with various African nations, most of them impoverished and home to petty dictators, such as the beleaguered nation of Zambia, where concerns have been raised that China is engaged in widespread human rights abuses against Zambian copper mine workers, according to a report released last week from Human Rights Watch.



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 in their treatment of Zambian workers. These violations include poor health and safety conditions, regular 12-hour and even 18-hour shifts involving arduous labor, and anti-union activities, all in violation of Zambia's national laws or international labor standards. The four Chinese-run copper mining companies in Zambia are subsidiaries of China Non-Ferrous Metals Mining Corporation, a state-owned enterprise under the authority of China's highest executive body. Copper mining is the lifeblood of the Zambian economy, contributing nearly 75 percent of the country's exports and two-thirds of the central government revenue.

"China's significant investment in Zambia's copper mining industry can benefit both Chinese and Zambians," said Daniel Bekele, Africa director at Human Rights Watch. "But the miners in Chinese-run companies have been subject to abusive health, safety, and labor conditions and longtime government indifference."

The report is based on [research](#) conducted during three field missions in November 2010 and July 2011 and draws on more than 170 interviews, including with 95 mine workers from the country's four Chinese copper operations and 48 mine workers from other multinational copper mining operations. Miners at Chinese-run firms said they were pleased that the companies had made a substantial investment in the copper mines and created jobs. But they described abusive employment conditions that violate national and international standards and fall short of practices among other multinational copper mining companies in the country.

"Sometimes when you find yourself in a dangerous position, they tell you to go ahead with the work," an underground miner at Non-Ferrous China Africa (NFCA) told Human Rights Watch. "They just consider production, not safety. If someone dies, he can be replaced tomorrow. And if you report the problem,



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you'll lose your job."

Between October 5 and October 12, 2011, miners at three of the four Chinese-run copper mining operations initiated strikes, hopeful that the new government's election would create an environment for improved conditions. Production ground to a halt. On October 19, Non-Ferrous China Africa, the longest-operating Chinese-owned copper mine, fired at least 1,000 striking workers. After government pressure in subsequent days, NFCA agreed to reinstate them. Reuters reported that NFCA's chief executive officer said that the reinstated workers would be screened and the "troublemakers" disciplined.

Miners from the Chinese-owned companies described consistently poor health and safety standards, including inadequate ventilation that can lead to serious lung diseases, the failure to replace workers' damaged protective equipment, and routine threats to fire workers who refuse to work in unsafe places underground. These practices, combined with the already dangerous nature of copper mining, cause injuries and other health complications. At times, Chinese managers bribe or threaten miners to keep them from reporting accidents or other problems to the government's Mines Safety Department, the miners said.

"Many of the poor health and safety practices we found in Zambia's Chinese-run mines look strikingly similar to abuses we see in China," Bekele said. "Respecting labor laws and ensuring workers' safety should be standard operating practice both in China and abroad, not treated as an irritating barrier to greater profits."

A Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman in Beijing, [Hong Lei](#) said the report did not accurately reflect conditions. "The conclusions reached by Human Rights Watch are inconsistent with the facts," Mr. Hong told reporters. 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.

Red Chinese Influence in Zambia

Relations between Zambia and China date back to 1949, when the newly-formed communist People's Republic of China focused on supporting Zambia's quest for independence from Great Britain, just as the Soviet Union supported anti-colonial activities throughout the developing world. China provided assistance to the independence movement and aid towards economic re-construction and consolidation of national independence while African countries provided support to China in the international arena, allowing China to establish diplomatic missions. This support was rooted in the anti-Western, Maoist ideology which pervaded the Great Cultural Revolution. Formal diplomatic ties were established in 1964, and since 1967, China has undertaken 35 aid-projects, including establishing the Tanzania-Zambia Railway.

According to a report authored by the African Economic Research Consortium, from 1979 onward, the nature of Sino-African relations shifted from that of ideological camaraderie to that of imperialism; as China emerged as a more liberal economy, with increased presence in the World Bank and International Monetary Fund, as well as an emphasis on economic development in mineral-rich African nations such as Zambia. Preferential loans and direct investment in Africa became China's *de rigueur* policy, as African nations pledged support for a one-China policy in the United Nations General Assembly, culminating in the formation of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation in 2000, which promised increased Chinese foreign aid and economic development.

Michael Sata, who won presidential elections in September, had for years tried to win votes by stirring



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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. Last week, Sata had even appointed a special envoy to China, Dr. Kenneth Zaunda, to improve bilateral relations. The President said he would utilize the Chinese Government in his first five-year term so that Zambians “largely benefit from their Chinese counterparts,” at a luncheon which hosted Chinese Communist Party officials and leaders of Sata’s Patriotic Front, whose party platform calls for “the eradication of capitalism,” (along with Sata’s pledges to support Chinese investments), and “supporting and implementing all socialist-oriented decisions and projects.” Sata’s initial steps after the election confirm the importance of the relationship with Beijing: his first official appointment at State House was with China’s ambassador Zhou Yuxiao.

Indeed, the Human Rights Watch report [notes](#) that this special relationship extends back to the days of President Rupiah Banda, who pursued close economic and diplomatic ties with China:

“The Zambian government appears to have applied little pressure on the Chinese copper mining companies to meet national and international labor standards beyond the flashpoint events that generated broad anti-Chinese sentiment. Miners, journalists, union officials, and others referred to the “special relationship” between Banda’s government and the Chinese government, including the state-owned companies. As a result, while miners who spoke to Human Rights Watch often expressed contempt for the Chinese management, many blame equally the previous Zambian government for its regulatory failures.”

Just as Chinese influence throughout the entire region increases, it is expected that Chinese economic dominance will continue to be wielded in Zambia, as President Sata has not made any concrete steps towards economic self-determination or ensuring that the rights of his citizens are not impinged by Chinese business concerns. Unfortunately for its citizens, Zambia has engaged in a policy of positioning itself as another arena for China to increase its hegemony and continue violating human rights.

Photo: The large Nkana open copper mine, Kitwe, Zambia.



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