

Zambian miners shot by Chinese mine owners

John Farmer
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Eleven miners were shot at the Chinese-owned Collum Coal Mine, in the Sinazongwe District of southern Zambia on October 15, while protesting against low wages and poor conditions. The miners had not been paid their salaries for the 11 days in September they were asked to stay away from the mine while there was no work to be done.

Two of the miners, Vincent Chengele, 20, and Simon Simwete, 28, were in a critical condition following the shooting.

Collum Mine Ltd. supplies coal to mines in the mineral-rich Copperbelt region and to Zambia's largest cement producer, Lafarge. Marketing manager Danny Law called the shooting "an accident," and claimed that two Chinese supervisors were attacked. "The miners attacked the employees", he said. "They had no other choice but to shoot in the air. Several people were wounded, but it's not serious."

One of the victims, Madinda Siamubotu, speaking from his hospital bed, said that a group of miners from mine shafts 2 and 3 assembled to discuss and decide what to do about their grievances regarding their conditions of service. When the two supervisors saw the workers gathered outside the gate, they came out of their offices with shotguns and opened fire on them.

A Zambian police spokesman told the AFP news agency, "The workers were protesting against the poor working conditions when managers using shotguns started to shoot aimlessly, not in the air."

The two supervisors have since been arrested and charged with attempted murder.

Concerned at reports in the Zambian media of a wave of opposition to Chinese investment in the country, the Chinese embassy in Lusaka directed Collum's management to pay the medical bills for the 11 miners. It also told the management to pay the disputed September wages and to arrange "negotiations between the two parties for a fair and decent salary settlement".

In return, the Zambian government carried out an investigation into what had happened and promised that miners who had "incited the riots" could be "brought to book".

The shooting at Collum was not the first incident involving Chinese-owned mines in Zambia. In 2005, an explosion at a plant owned by China Nonferrous Metal Mining Group, on the same site as the Chambishi Copper Mines, killed 46 miners in one of the deadliest blasts in the nation's history. A government inquiry found management responsible for disregarding safety measures at the plant, but the company was allowed to carry on working.

The following year, Chinese managers at Chambishi shot at least six miners during a wage protest. The investigation into this shooting was not made public.

In 2008, the water supply was polluted in Mufulira in the east of Zambia by the Mofani copper mine, putting many residents into hospital. Mining has established Zambia in the top 10 of the most polluted countries in the world.

The Collum miners are paid around US\$70 a month. They complain they are treated like slave labour and are the worst paid in the mining industry. Copper miners get slightly more, around US\$100 a month.

China has invested heavily in mining in Zambia, more than US\$400 million last year alone. There are at least three Chinese-owned mining operations, as well as a 150,000-tonnes-a-year copper smelter.

Mining is the main industry, yielding 70 percent of Zambia's export earnings. Falling copper prices have led to mine closures and thousands of redundancies. Last year, copper sales fell to US\$2.9 billion from US\$3.6 billion in 2008, an 18 percent drop. Government statistics show that output tonnage actually increased by 20 percent over the same period.

China stepped up investment during the recession

when many other investors pulled out. However, in the recent period, there has been growth in the price of copper, and the Chinese have been well placed to exploit the situation.

The Zambian elite, as in many African countries, has been pleased to accept Chinese investment with “no strings” compared to Western investment with International Monetary Fund and World Bank conditions. Zambia’s finance minister, Ng’andu Magande, denies there is any problem with Chinese backing: “So far in Zambia, I haven’t seen the strings. If they are there, they are nylon ones. I don’t see them. They are very thin.”

However, ahead of next year’s elections, the main opposition leader, Michael Sata of the Patriotic Front (Zambia for Zambians), is exploiting the widespread opposition to harsh conditions in Chinese-owned mines. He campaigns on an anti-Chinese platform, alleging that China is funding Zambia’s ruling party.



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