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Low pay, abusive conditions rife at Congolese cobalt mines — report

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A new report by British watchdog group RAID finds that workers at industrial cobalt mines in Congo — who dig up a key component of the lithium-ion batteries used in electric vehicles — deal with unsafe working conditions, physical abuse, long hours and extremely low pay. | Francis Chung/E&E News

GREENWIRE | Workers kicked, beaten and flogged by managers. Wages far below sustainable for comfortable human life. Labor agreements that trap employees in a cycle of poverty.

These are the labor conditions for some workers in the largest Congolese cobalt mines at the heart of making the modern electric car, according to a report

released today by British human rights groups RAID and the Centre d'Aide Juridico Judiciaire, or CAJJ, a Congolese legal aid center focused on labor rights.

“The exploitation of workers that we documented in Congo is widespread and systematic, and it taints electric vehicles,” RAID Executive Director Anneke Van Woudenberg told E&E News. “Those that want to buy electric vehicles would not be happy if they knew the batteries in those vehicles are tainted by the labor abuses in Congo.”

The findings, which were gathered over two years, are the latest allegations of human rights abuses tied to cobalt mining in Congo.

Cobalt, a silvery-blue metal, is a key component of lithium-ion batteries, necessary for not only electric vehicles but a host of consumer products.

Growth in the electric vehicle industry is expected to create an explosion in cobalt demand. The World Bank [estimates](#) demand for cobalt will increase by 585 percent by 2050. The clamor for cobalt will also put a larger spotlight on Congo as the country is one of the only places in the world where the mineral can be found in ample supply.

“There are a handful of key minerals that really need the Democratic Republic of the Congo as a key part of their sourcing, because there aren't very many places where these minerals can be found naturally,” said Michael Rohwer, director of information and communications technology at BSR, a business sustainability consulting firm.

In the past, claims of human rights problems at Congolese cobalt mines have centered on reports of child labor and unsafe working conditions at artisanal cobalt mines, informally organized mine sites without traditional corporate structures or oversight mechanisms ([Greenwire](#), Dec. 15, 2017).

In the wake of those allegations, companies reliant on using cobalt to make their products have pointed to voluntary industry standards for ethical sourcing and emphasized that most cobalt mining in Congo happens not at artisanal mines but at large-scale industrial cobalt mines.

However, this new report specifically examines those large-scale industrial cobalt mines, finding not only low pay and unsafe working conditions, but widespread abuses.

EV companies are acutely vulnerable to reputational risk, BloombergNEF analyst Kwasi Ampofo said in an interview with E&E News in late October.

Customers looking to buy EVs typically want their purchase to be a moral and just action, he noted. As a result, companies selling EVs must prioritize ethical sourcing of their materials. If they don't, they could lose customers.

“It’s become the center of gravity for the whole electrification journey, so automakers don’t have a choice. You either prioritize [ethics] and make it equally important, or you lose out on the energy transition,” Ampofo said.

Mines investigated by the human rights groups were linked to supplying cobalt to some of the largest auto manufacturers in the EV marketplace, including Tesla Inc., General Motors Co., Toyota Motor Corp., Volkswagen AG, Volvo Group, Renault Group and Chinese-owned BYD Co. The mines were also linked to technology titans Apple Inc., Panasonic Corp. and Samsung SDI, as well as battery companies Contemporary Amperex Technology Co. Ltd. and LG Chem Ltd.

Many of the manufacturers identified in the report responded to the human rights groups pledging to uphold the highest possible standards on human rights.

In letters published with the report, the companies told the human rights groups they hold their suppliers to high corporate social responsibility standards, check for abuses through independent audits of their supply chains, and work to adhere to international standards set by organizations like the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, or OECD.

EV companies also indicated they are trying to improve their supply chains, and acknowledged the industry may have suffered from a blind spot with cobalt mining.

“We recognize that even despite our best efforts, we may not realize the degree of positive impact that we desire. That is why research such as yours can be so

valuable in helping us identify problematic actors or regions,” General Motors supply chain manager Fred Gersdorff wrote the advocacy groups in an Oct. 18 email.

'Neo-colonialism'

RAID and CAJJ reviewed five mines owned or operated by multinational mining companies that altogether produced almost half of the global supply of cobalt in 2020: Swiss miner Glencore's Kamoto Copper Co.; Eurasian Resources Group's Metalkol RTR; China Molybdenum's Tenke Fungurume Mining; China Nonferrous Metal Mining Co.'s Société Minière de Deziwa, or Somidez; and Sino-congolaise des Mines, or Sicomines, a joint venture between a Congolese state-owned company and a consortium of Chinese firms and investors.

They found that at these mines, labor conditions have deteriorated as cobalt has risen in demand, with some workers being paid far below a livable wage. By relying on subcontractors to lower overhead costs, the companies offered workers health benefits so scant that they cannot afford malaria tests for their families.

Under these conditions, mine employees reported working extremely long hours and were rarely offered protective health and safety gear, potentially contributing to workers getting lifelong illnesses such as silicosis or lung cancer, according to the report.

The groups also discovered that at large mines operated by Chinese-owned companies, Congolese workers reported being subjected to violence at the hands of managers, recalling instances where mine employees were hit, kicked and beaten with shovels by managers.

The report includes anecdotes of racist workplace expectations, such as Congolese workers being required to address Chinese employees as superiors even if both people held the same job.

“Conditions for workers have worsened,” said one anonymous worker interviewed by the human rights groups and quoted in the report. “Chinese companies are imposing their standards and culture in a way that amounts to neo-colonialism.”

Of the five cobalt miners referenced in the report, four responded to inquiries submitted by the human rights groups for inclusion. Only one, Glencore, said it suspended an undisclosed number of deals with subcontractors in response to human rights concerns.

Van Woudenberg said the aim of the report was to expose problems so regulators and consumers around the world are aware of the labor conditions at cobalt mines. The hope, she said, is that the findings demonstrate more needs to be done to hold the companies reliant on cobalt accountable.

“We’re not asking the Earth here, or even the moon. What we’re asking here should be a critically important part of the transition, to tackle the climate crisis,” Van Woudenberg said.

**YOUR ACCOUNT MANAGEMENT TEAM****Bernardine Bruggen**

bbruggen@politico.com

(240) 565-2171

Salim Ajarrag

Pro Account Management Associates

sajarrag@politico.com

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