

Are Chinese Companies Mercilessly Exploiting Workers in Africa?

As Country Locks in Natural Resources, Local Workers Treated Like "Slave Labor," According to London Reporter

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In a well known but less well fully appreciated strategy, China for several years has been moving to lock in commodity supplies in various parts of the world, especially Africa.

Now, a powerful article from journalist **Peter Hitchens** in London's Daily Mail newspaper alleges that in addition to the longer term political and economic ramifications of those moves, some Chinese companies operating in Africa at best are exploiting local workers and in some cases treating them almost like "slave labor," according to a leading politician in Zambia.

Hitchens visited Chinese owned operations in both Zambia and The Congo. The former is a reasonably functioning democratic country with some semblance of political and legal structure. The Congo is a chaotic country ruled by a despot, President Joseph Kabila.

For the past several years, China has been buying commodity-based assets and land in many African countries, using a variety of mechanisms to get those deals done.

"Out of desperation, much of the continent is selling itself into a new era of corruption and virtual slavery as China seeks to buy up all the metals, minerals and oil she can lay her hands on," Hitchens wrote.

China "regards Zambia as a great prize, alongside its other favored nations of Sudan (oil), Angola (oil) and Congo (metals)," Hitchens added.

To win political favor in Zambia, China has cancelled some of the country's debts, eased Zambian exports

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to China, established a "special economic zone" in the Copper Belt, offered to build a sports stadium, schools, a hospital and an anti-malaria center as well as providing scholarships and dispatching experts to help with agriculture. Zambia-China trade is growing rapidly, primarily in the form of copper.

Just how big is China's presence and involvement in Africa? No one really knows.

"You've got Africa, the big black hole of data, and China, the big black hole of data -- put the two of them together and it's a disaster," **Lucy Corkin**, a China-Africa think-tank expert, said last year. China is said to be offering zero interest loans to businesses investing in Africa.

Deplorable Working Conditions

The Chinese "invasion" of Africa and the alleged exploitation of the workers there is a "wicked enterprise," Hitchens says.

"The poor, hopeless, angry people exist by grubbing for scraps of cobalt and copper ore in the filth and dust of abandoned copper mines in Congo,

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sinking perilous 80-foot shafts by hand, washing their finds in cholera-infected streams full of human filth, then pushing enormous two-hundredweight loads uphill on ancient bicycles to the nearby town of Likasi where middlemen buy them to sell on, mainly to Chinese businessmen hungry for these vital metals," he says.

Hitchens says many workers die as their primitive mines collapse on them, or are horribly injured without hope of medical treatment. Many of the workers are children. The pay: about \$3.00 for a very long and grueling day.

Hitchens says Chinese-owned mining operation "looked like a penal colony in an ancient slave empire."

Nearby are the graves of 54 Zambian workers killed a few years ago in a factory explosion. While Hitchens was there, another Zambian worker was beaten unconscious by Chinese employees angered the man had fallen asleep on the job. A government minister was recently shown weeping on TV after she saw first hand the working conditions at a Chinese-owned coal mine in the Southern Province of Zambia.

Corruption and Bribes

Hitchens also found heavy levels of corruption,

with bribery of local and national officials by Chinese companies commonplace, while most Western companies cannot play by those rules.

"A [Western] businessman shrugged over the way he is forced to wait weeks to get his products out of the country, while the Chinese have no such problems," Hitchens wrote. "I'm not sure the Chinese even know there are customs regulations," Hitchens quoted the businessman as saying. "They don't fill in the forms, they just pay [the bribes]."

Hitchens vividly describes just how bad the conditions are: "As dusk falls and the shadows lengthen, the scene looks like the blasted land of Mordor in Tolkien's Lord of the Rings: a pre-medieval prospect of hopeless, condemned toil in pits surrounded by stony desolation."

