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Zambia

Zambia: people are victims of extractivism

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Despite recurring environmental disasters and the dangers to the population, the government of Zambia continues its extractivist policy. The southern African country has once again been hit by major pollution. 50 million tonnes of acidic sludge were discharged into the watercourse running alongside the Chinese company Sino Metals in Chambishi, which processes copper ores.

Ecological disaster

The accident occurred on 18 February 2025. A wall in a storage area containing the sludge gave way, allowing the toxic waste to flow into the Mwambashi River, which joins the Kafu stream. The latter meanders through five of the country's provinces to join the Zambezi River.

The Zambian authorities did attempt to respond to the disaster by dumping 250 tonnes of lime to reduce the acidity; other aerial interventions involved the release of limestone. But none of this prevented the destruction of flora and fauna. Following the accident, the government stepped up inspections and closed the Ranging Mineral Processing Limited plant in Kalulishi for leaking sulphuric acid into the Kafue River. This is not the first time that Sino Metals has been involved in this type of accident. In 2011, and again in 2015, two similar problems occurred on its storage sites.

Mining at any cost

Zambia's environmental laws are of a rather high standard. The only problem is that they are not enforced. What's more, the country is heavily indebted, to the tune of 28 billion dollars. China holds \$5 billion of this debt and is playing an important role in negotiations to make this financial burden less restrictive, hence the great leniency shown to mining companies by the Asian giant. But Chinese companies are not the only ones involved. Just 245 kilometres from Chambishi lies another mining town, Kabwe, considered to be one of the most polluted in the world.

For decades, lead and zinc have been mined here without any protection. This production has had harmful effects on the health of the local population, particularly children. Although the mine has closed, it has left a number of slag heaps in the open air. The government authorized a number of companies to work these stockpiles, extracting both lead and zinc residues. With the idea that "mining is the anchor of our economy, it's the solution that will bring the most value, the most income", as Jito Kayumba, economic advisor to Hakainde Hichilema, president-elect in 2021, puts it.

Children's health sacrificed

As a result, truckloads of waste have been transported into the city itself, leaving some nine mounds scattered across the neighbourhoods. This exploitation has extremely serious health consequences. Experts believe that almost half of all children should receive emergency treatment for blood lead levels. Most of the companies are owned by leaders of the ruling party, giving them total impunity.

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Clandestine miners also try their luck, extracting unprotected remnants of ore from the slag heaps and selling them to large companies specializing in processing. By making mining the alpha and omega of its economic policy, Hakainde Hichilema's government is contributing to the deterioration of the environment and the health of many Zambians, without solving any social problems. The poverty rate is rising steadily, reaching 62%, a third of the population is malnourished, and at the same time the agricultural sector, which employs 60% of the population, is being neglected.

While the extraction of natural resources does little to create jobs, it does make the elite very rich. As proof of this, Zambia has one of the highest rates of inequality in

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