



Nowhere has this grass-roots backlash been stronger than in Zambia. In elections last fall, opposition leader Michael Sata ran for president on a platform of outright China-bashing, unleashing against Beijing the same kind of fury that populist radicals in Latin America or the Middle East direct at the U.S. "Zambia is becoming a province -- no, a district -- of China," he thundered. "We've removed one foreign power and we don't want another foreign power here, especially one that is not a democracy."

### **Widespread Support**

Though Mr. Sata failed to dislodge the China-backed incumbent, his Patriotic Front movement secured widespread support: It now controls Zambia's capital city Lusaka and most municipal governments in the nation's copper-rich mining areas. Following the Zambian campaign, similar political sentiments came to the open in neighboring countries, such as Namibia, Zimbabwe, Angola and Lesotho.

"Among ordinary people, a very strong resentment, bordering on racism, is emerging against the Chinese," says Henning Melber, a former activist in Namibia's struggle for majority rule who now heads the Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation think tank in Sweden. "It's because the Chinese are seen as backing the [African] governments in oppressing their own people."

China's hunger for raw materials is the main reason why it's become so involved in African affairs. Sino-African trade in 2006 more than quadrupled to more than \$55 billion since 2002, and is expected to hit \$100 billion by 2010. Angola has overtaken Saudi Arabia as China's main source of oil, with large-scale supplies also flowing from Sudan and Nigeria. Chinese companies have sought Guinea's bauxite, Namibia's uranium, and the assortment of rare metals that are found in the Congo, formerly known as Zaire.

In Zambia, a landlocked country of 11.5 million, the main draw for China is copper -- and the recent outcry is rooted in the tragic events that followed China's investment at the mine in Chambishi. China Non-Ferrous Metal Mining purchased the mine, which had been shuttered since 1987, for \$20 million. It stepped forward after a Canadian company that had initially won the tender pulled out of the deal. Investing more than \$100 million in the property, the Chinese conglomerate's Zambian unit, called NFC Africa Mining PLC, restarted production in late 2001, ramping up output to reach 50,000 metric tons of copper concentrate last year.

Dozens of Chinese managers and supervisors settled in the township, a maze of trash-strewn dirt alleys set across the paved road from the mine. Inside the mine itself, a red Chinese flag was hoisted above a wall covered with inspirational words of Wu Bangguo, chairman of the standing committee of the National People's Congress: "To Rouse Yourself in Vigorous Efforts to Make the Company Prosperous!"

As part of its prosperity plan, the mine's management paid Zambian employees less than the minimum wage, currently \$67 a month, and strictly prohibited union activity, according to employees and union officials. A 2004 memo to staff, which still hangs inside NFC Africa offices, warned of "severe punishment" for anyone attending meetings of the "so-called action group [of union organizers], which is illegal." People suspected of union involvement were fired on the spot, says Gillian Mubanga, the current union leader at the mine.

To drive up production and save on costs, NFC also established on the Chambishi property a joint venture with the Beijing General Research Institute of Mining and Metallurgy. Dubbed BGRIMM Explosives Ltd., it set out to manufacture cheap explosives for the region's mining industry. "BGRIMM -- Turning Your Rocks Into Gold," boasted advertisement billboards that still dot the roadsides across Zambia's Copper Belt region.

Then, one sunny morning in April 2005, Chambishi was rocked by a huge blast. Earth shook and windowpanes broke in nearby houses. A runaway chemical reaction turned the BGRIMM facility into a giant fireball, pulverizing the entire structure. A total of 46 Zambian employees of BGRIMM were killed, their charred body parts strewn around the smoldering crater. Eyewitnesses say the Chinese staff had hurriedly driven away from the site shortly before this explosion occurred. Local residents theorize that the Chinese realized something was about to happen and didn't bother warning African employees before fleeing themselves.

### **Anger Intensifies**

Unable to identify individual remains, the victims' families have had to bury plastic bags packed with flesh randomly collected at the site. Anger against the Chinese was intensified by widespread belief that safety rules had been flouted in pursuit of profit at the plant. "The Chinese didn't care about our children -- they just sacrificed them," said Iris Chibuye, a grieving mother whose 24-year-old son Sledge and 27-year-old daughter Vennie, a computer technician educated in Britain, both died in the BGRIMM disaster.

Though the Chinese government sent condolences to victims' families, and eventually paid compensation of about \$10,000 per killed employee, the anger didn't abate. As the Zambian government began an inquiry into the accident, the absence of union oversight was cited as the key cause of safety failures at BGRIMM. Public pressure made it impossible for the mine's management to continue prohibiting union activity any longer.

In November 2005, NFC Africa deputy CEO Wang Xiaowei shook hands with Zambia's National Union of Miners and Allied Workers leader Albert Mando, and signed a collective agreement that finally installed new safety measures and promised a salary increase. Assuring that the company treats its Zambian workers as "family members," Mr. Wang also urged the union "to understand that the high operational costs may often compromise the working conditions of employees," according to NFC Africa's in-house newsletter.

After drawn-out negotiations with the unions, NFC Africa set July 25, 2006, as the date for giving its workers back pay, in accordance with the new agreements. Miners had been expecting payments of as much as \$500 each -- but were told on payday that they would receive only a few dollars, and in some cases even owe money to the company. On the evening of July 24, night-shift miners, stunned to hear that they wouldn't be getting the expected cash, stopped work, vandalized equipment and beat up a Chinese supervisor. The following day, furious morning-shift employees blocked the main road in Chambishi with tree trunks and stones, marching toward the mine.

As a scuffle broke out at the gate, mine security fired at one of the protesters, wounding him. According to witnesses, as false rumors that he had been killed spread across Chambishi, another group of about 40 NFC Africa miners from a later shift rushed toward the residential compound of Chinese employees, set on a winding road inside the township.

At the white-and-blue gate into the walled compound, a Chinese supervisor, known to the Zambian miners simply as Mr. Qui, took out a shotgun and opened fire as the crowd approached, according to witness accounts. Hit by the shots, three demonstrators collapsed on the ground, blood gushing out. Mr. Mwanaumo, a 34-year-old jackhammer operator who says he didn't take part in the initial protest, ran to the site after hearing that a close friend had been shot. As Mr. Mwanaumo pulled his injured comrade away, a new volley of fire burrowed into his back. According to his medical report, two lead fragments are still lodged in his body, too close to the vital organs to be safely extracted in the local hospital.

A day after these shootings, Mr. Qui hastily left Chambishi. Mr. Mwanaumo, like the other wounded workers, was fired. Feeling too sick to work, he spends his days in a tiny, dark hut set amid sewage-soaked mud, hoping that relatives and friends will collect enough money to file a compensation lawsuit.

### **Investigation Continues**

The Zambian government investigation into the incident is still continuing, as is the inquiry into the 2005 BGRIMM disaster. Xu Riyong, NFC Africa's company secretary and manager of administration, declined to discuss the details of these events, or elaborate on Mr. Qui's status, saying that the company has already made a comprehensive report to the Zambian government on the matter.

"By complying with the laws of Zambia, we are confident that no problems will come to us," said Mr. Xu, the only NFC Africa official who agreed to be interviewed for this story. "We will do our best to run this mine successfully. We have to keep quiet and to keep working. Why should we fear?"

The Zambian government has so far apportioned no blame for the Chambishi tragedy. In an interview, Zambia's minister of mines, Kalombo Mwansa, declined to forecast when

the investigations into the explosion and the shootings at the mine might be concluded, when the report will be released, and whether any penalties might be levied against the Chinese company. In the meantime, he said, NFC Africa's BGRIMM affiliate has been allowed to rebuild and reopen an explosives factory at the site of the 2005 tragedy. NFC Africa has also announced that it will invest \$220 million into a crude-copper smelting plant in Chambishi. President Hu was scheduled to visit Chambishi this weekend to lay the cornerstone for the smelter -- but, according to Zambian officials, this part of his schedule was called off because of planned protests by miners and families of BGRIMM explosion victims.

The risks in Chambishi are real. Sitting next to Mr. Mwanaumo, the worker who was shot in July, a friend currently employed by NFC Africa warned of even bloodier unrest to come at the mine. "There will be a strike soon if they don't improve our salary, and a lot of people will die," he said. "This time the police won't be able to contain us." The management seems to be getting the message. On a recent afternoon, workers were busy at the Chinese staff's Chambishi residential compound. Perched on the perimeter wall, they reinforced fortifications, installing a new row of high-voltage fencing atop an existing layer of spiky glass shards.

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