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On August 5 about 300 villagers from Solton Sary area, about 200 km from capital Bishkek, gathered at the Chinese owned Zhong Ji mining companys office here to protest against gold mining works, which they claimed were killing their cattle. Thus, another mining scandal has erupted in Kyrgyzstan, where most people make a living on raising livestock.

Locals claim the mining company is contaminating their soil on which the cattle and sheep graze. We have lost about a hundred sheep last month, we are pretty sure that the meat is contaminated and cannot be used as sheep are just dying out and its suspicious, a local activist and a shepherd Osmonov K told IDN.

When protestors entered the mine in order to force workers out, the two groups threw stones at each other. After the unsuccessful attempt to force out the Chinese workers from the mine, locals decided to camp out here as a protest. On August 6 eight yurts □ traditional circular homes of the Nomadic people made with wooden frames and animal skin walls □ were built at the pasture land near the mine and about a hundred people were camping at Solton Sary.

It seems to be a familiar story: government officials make allowances to foreign investors, which people are not happy with and through protests ordinary people try to make their voice heard. As a result of the stone-throwing at the protest, 48 Chinese mine workers and one Kyrgyz protestor were hospitalized.

According to Naryns regional hospital sources, two Chinese citizens are in intensive care department, but their condition is stabilized. Chinese ambassador Du Davan has visited the injured ones who have been taken to Bishkek hospital. Chinese embassy has made several demands from the Kyrgyz government in regard to the incident. These include providing medical assistance to all victims as a priority, conduct an investigation of the incident and strictly punish the guilty.

The Chinese side firmly asks the government and relevant departments of the Kyrgyz Republic to

take effective measures to protect the legitimate rights and interests of Chinese companies, to ensure the safety of Chinese citizens, and to avoid the recurrence of such incidents, the embassy press-secretary Esengulova K said in a statement.

At the moment order is being provided by police officers (with) reinforcements from Bishkek, the statement acknowledged and called on the people not to resort to any aggressive actions and behave calmly.

The Zhong Ji mining company has been operating in Kyrgyzstan since 2009. They have acquired all the required licenses, but recently several activities endangering the ecology of the region have been discovered. These were mainly linked to the issue of soil waste management and a soil blow-up rate.

Thus, after locals contacted the government with regard to the dying cattle, they claimed were due to soil burst-ups, Zhong Ji took the responsibility to pay damages, if the supposed reason is proven. Recently, Emil Osmonbetov who is the head of the Government Committee of Energy and Land-use has contacted the Zhong Ji Mining to remind them to pay the damages in order to support the positive image of the company. Though the company has again agreed to do so, no money has been forthcoming to compensate the grazing community here.

Meanwhile, the situation has calmed down the mine. However, several activists are continuing to make statements to the media and the government about their complaints and concerns. Their main requirement is to stop the mining works in the Solton Sary pasture areas.

When asked why activists decided to break into the mining area, Osmonov, who participated in the action said: We kept waiting for changes from the government side but since they did nothing we had no choice but to protect these pure lands ourselves. Moreover, one of the reasons for such aggressive action from locals was a brawl between Chinese workers and two local shepherds. According to locals, Chinese workers had beaten up a Kyrgyz national.

To avoid any possible conflicts., the police strengthened their presence and brought up to 50 more officers from Bishkek. People have calmed down, right now there are no aggressive outbreaks here. Hopefully, locals will find better ways of handling such issues in the future, Aibek M, an officer from Naryn Police Department told IDN.

When the protest action occurred, there was also a counter protest from a local group with both sides throwing stones at each other. The mine has been licensed without locals consent and the government has not kept the company accountable for practicing eco-friendly methods of mining within the Kyrgyz law. Thus, many locals here see it as an irony how some could fight the

protestors on behalf of the government. They perceive this incident as an attempt to create conflict in the community to safeguard foreign investor interests.

There are soil bursts; air and water get spoiled by chemical dust around, says Osmonov, astonished at how some locals may find this as a welcome development in the community. We have been using these pastures for centuries now; if the mining carries on (like this) we will lose a bigger part of Solton Sary.

The Chinese company didn't take any responsibility to work on rehabilitating the land. So, we are at the risk of losing the land, cattle, and a healthy ecology in the region, he adds.

Due to the protest, mining activity has come to a standstill and there is an investigation going on. The Chinese company has taken out the technology equipment and trucks away from the mine.

The very first license for mining was given by the director of government agency of geology and mineral resources of Kyrgystan, Kurmanaliev K. in 2009, and the recent one was in February 2018 under the governance of a former vice-president Sapar Isakov.

The size of the Solton Sary mining area is 1,500 hectares. The overall payments made by the company are about 211.9 million soms (USD 3.05 million). So far this year there were 1.3 tons of gold mined, and 2.1 tons are expected in the coming year. With the current situation, mining plans might be changed.

Since 2015, the Chinese company has made about 37.2 million soms (USD 0.5 million) of charity spending, which was transferred to governmental social fund. It appears that the funds are intended to be used as a payment to socially vulnerable people, pension payments and so on. Overall payments made by the company are reported to sum up to USD 533,715.

Owner of the Zhong Ji Mining is a Chinese citizen Suy Govey, and the company was established by China Gold Hong Kong Buchuk Mining Company Limited.

To resolve the issue of an ecological disaster, the government has started criminal and ecological investigations. People here are sceptical if that be enough to address the issue.

If government keeps ignoring our views and interests, we will keep protesting more and more against this unfairness, warns Osmonov. Who knows if the (government) committee has not been corrupted? If the cattle is dying, then our health is also endangered.

* The writer is a media studies student at the University of Central Asia, who is doing a summer internship with IDN-INPS as the correspondent for Kyrgyzstan. [IDN-InDepthNews – 19 August 2019]

Photo (top): Chinese trucks which bring goods to local markets. Other photos: Local children who study at Jailoo Kindergarten at Solton-Sary. The kindergarten was initiated by Roza Otunbaeva and executed by Mountain Societies Development Supporting Program (one of the Aga Khan Development Network). All the other photos were taken nearby the Solton-Sary mine. Those are the actual Solton-Sary pastures. Credit: Kalinga Seneviratne | IDN-INPS

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