

Opinion: Child labor still a problem in minerals industry

By Juliane Kippenberg, Human Rights Watch, adapted by Newsela staff on 06.07.16

Word Count **640**

Level **870L**



A child stands next to blackened zinc sheets, used in illegal gold mining, at the municipal-owned G Hostel on the outskirts of Welkom, South Africa, Oct. 10, 2007. AP Photo/Peter Dejong

I recently met “Joshua” in Ghana. Joshua was about 7 years old and worked in a gold mine. Surrounded by dust and noise from rock crushing machines, his job was to shovel and pan rocks that might contain gold.

Joshua is one of the many children who work in small-scale mines in Asia, Africa and Latin America. The mines use simple machinery, and are not checked by the government.

Not Doing Enough To Prevent Abuses

The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) has a chance to do something about this. The OECD is formed by countries all over the world. It studies and coordinates economic laws within each of these countries.

In 2011, the OECD wrote the Due Diligence Guidance. This document gives five steps that companies need to take to respect human rights. It applies not only to war-torn regions, but also to “high-risk” areas like Ghana.

So far, the OECD has not done enough about child labor in the mineral business. It has instead concentrated on the fact that companies buy raw materials from war-torn Central and East Africa. Child labor has received far less attention.

Risks Of Child Labor

The Human Rights Watch is in charge of looking at human rights internationally. It has documented the risks children face in small-scale gold mines. Children have died or been injured when mining pits have collapsed.

They have also risked mercury poisoning. Mercury is a chemical that causes brain damage, heart and lung conditions and other health problems. Work in mining can also get in the way of children's education. Child miners often find it difficult to attend school regularly. Sometimes, they drop out altogether.

Businesses sometimes do not make sure that their raw materials did not come from child labor. Many gold traders do not check the labor conditions at the mines they buy from. Sometimes, they even buy gold from child workers. This gold is then used by global companies.

In Ghana, we found that traders bought gold from unlicensed mines. Child labor was very common in these mines. Some of this gold was sold to big companies like Metalor, Emirates Gold and Kaloti. These companies sell their products across the world. This is how gold processed by Joshua may easily end up in our watches, smartphones or other goods.

What Does The World Need To Do?

There are some hopeful signs at the OECD. At this week's OECD meeting, participants will discuss a suggested set of tools for companies. The tools could be used to see if child labor was used to get their raw material. The OECD is also talking about child labor more frequently. These are good first steps.

What is needed is for the OECD, governments and companies to work together. Companies need to have systems in place to discover child labor risks. The systems should be monitored by someone or a group from outside the company. Finally, every company should report publicly about their efforts.

Companies should also cooperate with each other. This kind of effort has already been used against child labor in cocoa and tobacco fields. The OECD can provide a space for comparing ideas and bringing in thoughts from experts.

Finally, the OECD and its member states need to sharpen their teeth. It is not enough to expect minerals companies to be responsible. The OECD should set up a system to effectively check the implementation of the Due Diligence Guidance. The system should include regular and public reviews. Member states should also make due diligence the law for all businesses.

Later this month, countries from across the world will vote on a treaty for human rights in the global market. Taking these steps would help make the future of children like Joshua look brighter.

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