

special feature

Overworked and underpaid, p

Life is like hell for Nigerians who work in various quarries operated by foreigners in Abuja suburbs, ADELANI ADEPEGBA writes

HIDDEN far away from the urban glitz of Abuja at a village whose only claim to modernity is a borehole, the quarry lies at the end of a gutted, tortuous, curse of a road. The Hong Yun Mining Industries is located a few meters after Durumi Village, some dusty kilometres after Mpape, a rundown slum seething with humanity.

Owned by a Chinese national, simply identified as Mr. Chen, the quarry employed 33 Chinese and 17 Nigerians. It is located beside a rocky mountain wearing scars of excavation like a badge. Yet, it stands resolute, even if it is showing its festering wound to the world like a proud war veteran.

The fact is that a casual observer may be fooled by the wretched look of the arena - but the proprietor is said to be raking in millions of Naira in profit which, like many expatriate investors, he repatriates to his home country. But for the workers, it is a dog's life: a life of penury, risks, and exposure to long-term life threatening diseases like cancer, bronchitis, asthma and other respiratory infections.

Over-worked, but underpaid

Investigations show that the average worker earns paltry N26,000, working 30 days in a month. The highest paid Nigerian in Hong Yun earns N70,000 as an engineer, while a Chinese engineer can reportedly earn as much as about N1 million monthly for doing the same work as his Nigerian counterpart. Apart from underpaying the workers, many of the natives are surprised that the Chinese owner also employed his compatriots to do menial workers that Nigerians can easily do. Thus, many Chinese who can hardly communicate in English work as mechanics, drivers, cashiers, sweepers and even security guards.

At Zebarzed Quarry located off Arab Road, Kubwa, the noise from stone blasting has become a normal thing to the residents of the area. The workers, it was learnt, were usually given a dozen tins of evaporated milk every month to fortify them against the dust inhaled at work. Our correspondent gathered that the workers once protested against the Turkish managers of the quarry over delay in the sharing of the milk to them.

A worker says they battle with dust and the protective face mask given to them by the company is not adequate to protect the eyes and nostril from dust particles, tiny stones and other

airborne objects that are dangerous to human health. Another worker who does not want his name mentioned to avoid sanction says the quarry workers are daily exposed to dangers from blasted rocks, a situation that he believes can inflict serious injuries.

Checks indicated that the conditions of workers in other quarries like Venus, Auspicious, Dachi, Arab Construction, CNC, Danji Jam and others in the FCT is not different from that of workers in Hong Yun Quarry. Most of them are overworked and underpaid, and cases of discrimination and physical attacks and abuse also abound. Accidents are common from lax observation of safety regulations and deaths are regular incidents.

In what looks like good news, workers at Arab Construction quarries say they are given 30 tins of milk every month and they enjoy accident bonus and annual leave. But as is the case in other mines, some Egyptians are given work that could be done by Nigerians and the highest position a Nigerian can attain is a supervisor.

Health risks

A common health risk encountered by people working in the quarry industry is exposure to fine respirable dust which contains silica. Silica is found in the majority of rocks, sands and clays and therefore workers within the quarrying industry are particularly susceptible, according to health experts.

Findings indicate that quarry workers are at risk of fine airborne particles entering, the respiratory tract. However, these small particles are often not visible to the naked eye and therefore may not be an obvious exposure risk to workers. Exposure over a number of years has been known to lead to the development of a condition known as silicosis. This is a form of scar tissue in the gas exchange region of the lungs that leads to difficulties in oxygen uptake into the bloodstream. Medical experts say the new evidence suggests that long term exposure to silica can increase the risk of the development of lung cancer.

Silica dust exposure can arise from the quarrying of stone and also from small scale working such as cutting and processing of kerbstones, block paving, bricks, flags and tiles. Other work sectors include mining of stone and refractory manufacturing, pottery, cement production, ceramics and sandblasting processes.

The National President, Nigeria Medical Association, Dr. Osahan Enabulele, explains that mine workers often suffer allergic respiratory disorders. According to him, inhalation of dust and other particles can trigger off asthmatic attack in those prone to the disease.

He says, "Although most of the workers wear protective face masks, this is not enough to protect them from inhaling dust and other stone particles and they may suffer allergic respiratory disorders which can trigger off asthma attack in those prone to asthma. It can also result in upper respiratory infection."

Asked if the workers can get cancer by working in such an environment, Enabulele is cautious, saying he cannot speak much on the carcinogenic properties of the quarries.

"They can have recurrent skin allergic manifestations. They can also suffer physical injuries, conjunctivitis, injection of foreign bodies into the eyes, ocular trauma and so on. The quarry managers should be educated to protect their workers," he says.

The NMA President stresses that the government needs to enforce healthy working environment, as well as ensure adequate compensation for those that suffer injuries, in view of the highly hazardous environment they work.

Many of the quarries do not have clinics. The mine workers union has been pressing the management of Hong Yun to



• One of the sites

provide a clinic within the premises for workers, but this has yet to be done. The company is also accused of deducting workers' annual allowance of N15,000 anytime they take ill and do not report for work.

Catalogue of accidents and deaths

Accidents and deaths are regular incidents in the quarry industry. In 2010, an explosion killed a Turkish manager and a Nigerian at the Zebarzed quarry. A dynamite that was timed to blast a rock was said to have been triggered by thunder and the resulting explosion killed the two men. In 2012, a Nigerian, Patrick Josiah, died painfully when he fell into the stone crusher. His family were said to have been paid N1 million by the Zebarzed management.

Also in August 2013, a pay-loader fell on a Nigerian, Mohammed Audu. He was said to be hanging on the machine coming down when it fell and crushed him to death. His family was reportedly compensated too.

A worker who spoke on condition of anonymity explains that the clinic in Zebarzed Quarry can treat only minor injuries, adding that anyone with serious wounds would be treated in hospitals at his own cost.

"I don't remember the management giving any injured worker money to treat his injuries, unless the workers union takes the matter up. I remembered that in 2011, one of our drivers suddenly developed severe stomach ache and we rushed him to the hospital but he died before we got there," he states.

A gravel dealer who operates an office around the quarry, Murtala Sulaiman, notes that the workers in charge of the concrete mixer are at higher risks because of their daily exposure to cement dust.

He explains, "Those in charge of the concrete mixer face higher risks of contracting dangerous diseases because they inhale the cement and dust particles every day. When they spit out phlegm, you can see how the cement has coloured the sputum and you don't need a medical expert to tell you that the men face long-term health issues."

According to Sulaiman, the workers can also suffer injuries if hit by the heavy concrete slabs produced by their unit.



• Minister of Labour and Productivity, Emeka Wogu