

Thousands of people are affected by pollution from a Chinese-owned copper mine in the Serbian city of Bor

Ahead of a review of China at the United Nations Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights next week, FIAN International and Serbian rights groups urge the CESCR to call on China to protect the human rights of people affected by the country's overseas investments.

In a **joint submission** to the CESCR, FIAN International and several Serbian rights groups highlight China's ongoing failure to respect the fundamental human rights of people affected by Chinese businesses in Serbia.

Since 2019, in the eastern city of Bor, 50,000 people have been exposed to dangerous levels of air pollution, when China's Zijin Mining Group took over operation of a massive copper mining and smelting complex, one of [Europe's biggest copper mining operations](#). Serbia **Zijin Mining**, a subsidiary of Chinese state-backed Zijin Mining Group has since tripled production at the complex, increasing emissions of sulphur dioxide, heavy metals and other dangerous chemicals which have regularly exceeded permitted levels.

Higher risk for malignant tumors

"The Serbian authorities, including the court, are lenient when it comes to Chinese projects and investors because they claim that these activities are strategically important for the Republic of Serbia, closing their eyes on pollution, environmental damage, and the suffering of the local people," said Hristina Vojvodic, Senior Legal Officer at the [Renewables and Environmental Regulatory Institute \(RERI\)](#).

"Instead, the government must prohibit the project and all activities until the approval of the competent authority is obtained," she added, referring to the company's lack of construction permits and environmental impact assessments.

An official study by the Ministry of Health, the Ministry of Environmental Protection, and the Institute for Public Health of Serbia found a significantly higher risk for malignant tumors, illness, and death in Bor due to high pollution levels.

"The inhabitants of Bor are exposed to long-term inhalation of very high concentrations of arsenic... This results in a proportionately enormously increased risk of developing malignant diseases," said Prof. Dragana Jovanovic, a pulmonologist who has testified in air pollution cases.

Illegal discharges of waste and mining waters have polluted several local rivers of ecological importance for the region. Pyrite dumping, excavation and tailing disposal linked to the copper mining and smelting process have contaminated arable land, leaving farmers without an income. Some complain that they have been pushed off their land by Serbian authorities.

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Land grabbing

“My family was initially offered an unacceptably low price for the purchase of our house and land. When we rejected the offer, we were immediately deprived of the land we cultivated, and the land was given to Zijin Mining,” said Miodrag Živkovic, local villager from Bor.

“There is an atmosphere of fear ... People accept the company’s lowest offers for expropriation of their property because they are aware that it will be confiscated anyway, and that they will lose their houses in which they live and [the] land they cultivate... Without land, we cannot earn from agriculture anymore, and we are not yet paid for the expropriated property.”

Serbia Zijin Mining has been convicted four times in the last two years for commercial offences but each time received [fines below the legal minimum](#). During court hearings, the company acknowledged its unlawful actions in conducting mining activities without construction permits and approval of an environmental impact assessment. Local people affected by the mining complex have not received any compensation, despite the court rulings.

The CESCR issues recommendations to countries. During the last CESCR review of China in 2014, the committee raised concerns over human rights violations linked to overseas projects. It called on China to ensure that its companies, both state-owned and private sector, respect human rights when operating abroad. Nonetheless, human rights abuses and violations have continued unabated.

FIAN and its Serbian partners strongly call upon the CESCR to recommend to China to abide by its human rights obligations towards the people of Bor, including through effective regulation of their companies acting overseas and providing effective access to justice and remedy to the communities affected by actions or omissions of those companies, FIAN writes.