

The Ministry of the Environment initiated proceedings against Zijin Bor Copper for the release of hazardous substances into the air in November 2019 and January 2020. The ministry has controlled the company several times, and at least five times it has identified failures since the mining basin was privatized in late 2018. While the authorities shift responsibility to each other, the lives of 45,000 Bor citizens are endangered.

At the end of one working week, an employee at Zidjin, formerly RTB Bor, waited for an unpleasant surprise at the door of the administration building – their fellow citizens whistled and shouted: “You betrayed the city.” With the support of residents of the surrounding towns and political activists, on November 15, 2019, part of Bor residents protested over months because of pollution coming from the mining basin. With the message “Our Health or Your Profit” and with face masks, the Chinese investor was asked to reduce production volumes and thus the air pollution that suffocates them.

“Sulfur dioxide directly damages the health,” Dr. Dragica Radosevic addressed the event. Heavy metals such as arsenic, which can also lead to malignant tumors, are even more dangerous, he explains.

Katarina Vaskovic, a protest participant, complained to the media that life in Bor was quarantined.

“Our children live in quarantine, we can only take them outside when we estimate that there is not so much smoke. Every other kid in the neighborhood gets an asthma pump,” Vaskovic said.

The protesters supported the speakers for a full two hours.

However, on the day of the protest, Bor was not contaminated. The air did not scratch his throat, and eyes did not tear, as Bor residents otherwise claim, and there was no need to close into homes. Local clean air is explained by the decline in Zidjin’s production of copper and precious metals – because of protests and television cameras.

Data obtained by the Center for Investigative Reporting in Serbia (CINS) confirms that there was no excessive pollution on the day of the protests, as well as for the next five days, but then came back – stronger than the Air Protection Act allows.

One week after the protest, environmental inspector Emila Tasic visited Zidjin and found that sulfur dioxide (SO₂) concentrations had gone up to 4.6 times the statutory limits during those two days, November 21 and 22. In some hours, the amount of SO₂ in the air was 8.3 times higher than allowed, according to the inspector’s report. SO₂ is a gas of sharp odor that causes frequent coughing and pharyngeal irritation. It is the cause of respiratory and cardiovascular diseases and is most harmful to children, the elderly and people with chronic lung diseases.

Pollution was measured just a five-minute walk from the mining pool gate, at a station maintained by the Environmental Protection Agency (SEPA) in the city park.

In January 2020, the inspection controlled Zidjin and found the same omissions, the documentation obtained by CINS shows.

Due to the release of hazardous substances into the air and the company did nothing to reduce pollution, the proceedings before the Commercial Court in Zajecar against the company Zidjin and the deputy head of the TIR branch causing the problem, Boban Todorovic. They are charged with an economic offense for which a fine of between 1.5 and 3 million dinars has been imposed, and the court can impose a sentence commensurate with the damage done.

Nataša Djereg from the NGO Center for Environment and Sustainable Development (CEKOR) believes that such punishment does not help:

“Our fines are ridiculous – of course it pays for all polluters to continue to pollute, especially at such large plants, to pay the fine and move on. A fine is not a measure, the penalty would be to stop production. ”

Former head of the TIR branch, Paun Jankovic, in an interview with CINS, said stopping production was not in the interest of the majority owner – currently China’s state-owned Zijin International Finance Company Limited (63%), while the Serbian government is the second largest co-owner with 36.9%. Cessation of work means less income, but it can affect problem solving, Jovanovic explains:

“There are technical solutions – to urgently eliminate the causes of this bad show. If necessary, stop production for a week, two weeks, mechanically repair what is needed and then go back to normal. ”

Zijin’s earlier omissions

This is not the first time that Zijin, formerly RTB Bor, has not adhered to the rules. Since the privatization of the mining basin, in December 2018, Inspector Tasic has noticed at least five times various omissions.

As early as April 2019, the inspector had ordered the company to take action against air pollution of the environment, human health and the environment, because it emitted excessive SO₂, reports CINS reported. Zijin then explained in a letter to the Ministry of Environment that the power outage had caused pollution.

However, control a few months later, in August, showed another omission – Zijin did not have a system for wet dust removal during the transportation of tailings on the Bor mine, which also threatened human health and the environment. Zijin was ordered to solve the

problem, and the company later told the Ministry that a dust suppression system had been installed, which was put to trial.

In November 2019, CINS sought an interview with Zijin on the topic of air pollution, to which the company responded with a press release. It says that by the end of the year, the company will have a total of five SO₂-neutralized dust spray machines. Documentation obtained by CINS shows that by that time, two of the machines purchased had been in operation for about two months, but pollution data showed that it had no significant effect on the reduction of sulfur dioxide - in October the number of days with more SO₂ in the air it was slightly smaller.

Zijin announces other investments - a dust and exhaust gas collection plant, and by the end of 2021 the construction of an additional facility to ensure that "the emission of gases is always and fully in line with the prescribed standards".

Shifting responsibility

Bor residents are not satisfied with communication with the Ministry, as they do not receive answers on measures taken to reduce air pollution.

From a recording of a phone conversation between activist and chairman of the Dveri District Committee, Sasa Stankovic, with Aleksandar Blagojevic of the Ministry's inspection sector, posted by Bor activists in October 2019 on Facebook page 1 of 5 million Bor, it appears that the inspection does not go out on the field exploration at all but to notify Zijin about the pollution by phone as part of the procedure.

Blagojevic explained that the inspector "called the company and told them that there were exceedances of one-hour values and that they should reduce production or put more fresh raw material than slag." He also stressed that there is a legal obligation for the City of Bor to adopt a Short-term Action Plan that specifies when Zijin should stop production for several hours or days.

From Municipality they say the Short-term Action Plan has nothing to do with the work of the Republic Inspectorate.

"The inspectors are known to work. When any accident occurs, the inspector goes out to see what is going on, the real record, measures are taken regardless of the Short-term Action Plan. We will see when we come up with a Plan, how much we will be able to influence the work of the company," said Ljiljana Lekic of the City of Bor's Environmental Protection Office.

She explained that they started drafting the Plan and that representatives of local environmental associations, including those organizing protests, are involved. Still, Lekic

says the plan will only provide guidance for solving the problem.

Toplica Marijanovic, formerly Deputy Director of Environmental Protection at RTB, says the action plan is not binding, and even the inspector cannot ask the polluter to implement it.

“This is an effort for the Ministry, or the state, to shift all responsibility for the state of air quality to local self-government, and local self-government has no power or ability to react in any way in industrial and mining facilities for which the state license is issued,”

Marijanović said.

In the meantime, pollution is still present in Bor. SEPA issued a warning that they were dangerous to human health on January 24 and 26 due to the concentration of SO₂ at two measurement sites.

While Aleksandar Milikic, Bor Mayor and SNS official, says the pressures are political because the protest is led by Alliance for Serbia member and Dragan Djilas associate, Irena Zivkovic, she, along with three other activists, including Sasa Stankovic from of the Dveri movement, in late November, filed criminal charges against the director of Zijin Bor Koper, Long Ji, the mayor of Bor, and the Minister of the Environment, Goran Trivan.

The Ministry did not respond to CINS’s questions regarding local government control over the adoption of the Short-term Action Plan, or whether it would be able to order production to be halted in Zidjin.

New owner - new pollution

According to the regulations, SO₂ in one measuring point may be exceeded only three days a year. It has not been respected in Bor for years. The metering station in the city park, near the mining basin, showed SO₂ pollution for an average of five months in 2014, to a total of 13 days by 2018, and then jumped to 40 with a Chinese investor, SEPA data shows.

The findings of the Bor Mining and Metallurgy Institute’s 2018 report are not encouraging. There were more than allowed SO₂ and harmful PM₁₀ particles on an annual basis, most commonly affecting blood and respiratory diseases. Arsenic was 24 times more than allowed in Bor. Pollution in Serbia is in many places above the legal limit.

High concentrations of pollutants affect the health of Bor residents.

About two-thirds of pre-school children and half under the age of 18, who in 2014-2018 sought the help of a doctor, had problems with their respiratory organs. They most often suffered from sore throat and tonsils, according to data on the health status of residents of the town of Bor published by the Institute for Public Health Timok in Zajecar.

These inflammations are the second most common disease in adults, with nine cases in every 100 inhabitants.

Although dominant, these diseases have a slight downward trend over the five-year period, coupled with declining production of the mining basin and a decrease in air pollution. After the privatization of RTB Bor, pollution increased again.

Source: cins.rs