Chinese Workers in Africa

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Earlier this week, a group of gunmen rushed into a Chinese-run oil field in Eastern Ethiopia and started shooting. Seventy-four people were killed instantly. Among the victims, nine were workers from China. The gunmen, who came from the ethnic Somali rebels, also kidnapped seven Chinese workers.

While China's investment in Africa raises eyebrows around the world, the vast number of Chinese migrant workers in the region rarely attracts attention. China has quickly become a prominent presence in many key industries in Africa, including petroleum fields, construction sites, mines, and textile mills. Unlike the western investors in Africa, who only brought managers and engineers and hired mainly local laborers, the Chinese have brought along their own workforce. Many of them, especially the illegal ones, are determined to stay. This will have profound impacts on the Sino-African relationship.

Officially, there are only 100,000 Chinese workers in Africa, or about 15 percent of the total overseas Chinese workforce. In 2005, 35 percent of the Chinese workers were employed in manufactures, and close to 30 percent were employed in construction. The trend in the past five years shows that the manufactures share has been decreasing, while the construction share has been dramatically increasing.

However, observers believe that the official number reflects but a fraction of the reality. Reports from both Africa and China indicate that big cities and industrial zones are filled with Chinese laborers. According to OECD, some 700 Chinese firms are estimated to hold a total investment of US$6.3 billion in Africa. The Chinese government reports the number of investments at 800. Wherever the Chinese firms go, they bring the Chinese workers.

Generally, the Chinese workers find employment overseas via three channels. First, by the end of 2006, there were 1,609 companies which were licensed to recruit and to send workers abroad. Approximately half a million workers are sent abroad, a small percentage of the estimated three to four million overseas migrant workers. More than half of workers in this category are recruited in five coastal provinces. Workers hired by such firms are often sent to work in government-run projects, such as railway and highway construction, oil fields, and mines.

These jobs are rather desired opportunities, especially for non-skilled migrant workers. The average wage is two times or more than the comparable position inside China. Being far away from home and living in company-provided housing, workers are able to save more.

Although wage delinquency and bad working conditions are not as prevalent in the government-run projects, workers often complain about the living conditions. Most of the workers live in company dormitories, where strict rules, such as curfew, are imposed daily. Companies also forbid workers, mostly male, to have any relationship with local women, usually arguing this system will prevent the contraction of AIDS or other STDs.

These workers are increasingly becoming targets for crime and terrorism. The incident in Ethiopia is only the most recent episode. In 2007, 16 Chinese workers were kidnapped in Nigeria in several separate incidents. Interestingly, a prominent Nigerian-Chinese, who was born in Shanghai, migrated to Nigeria in 1978, and rose to the rank of
chief acted as the go-between and rescued the workers. The media reported large sum of ransom paid. Both governments denied the fact.

Li Shaofu, a worker from a Sichuan village, fell victim to one such incident. Li worked for a construction project in Nigeria contracted by a Chinese telecommunication company. He borrowed money to pay for his wedding 16 years ago, and was forever in debt. The Nigerian job paid $500 per month, which was about four times as much as he could get in China. After being released, he vowed that he would not leave China again.

Li Wensheng from a village in Hunan was not as lucky. He was gunned down while having dinner in a South African Restaurant, survived by his wife and three children. He belonged to the second type of recruitment, namely, employment in private firms.

This type of recruitment is often semi-legal. Specialized employment agencies sign agreements with foreign businesses, usually manufacture companies with owners of Chinese decent, to hire workers. The agencies charge a high fee, sometimes equivalent to a full year’s wage, and routinely make false promises of wages and benefits.

In 2005, 1,500 Chinese workers, mostly female, held a demonstration in Port Louis, Mauritius. The angry protestors shouted "justice for workers," as they walked to the Chinese embassy. The local police intervened, and fired tear gas at the demonstrators, injuring several people. The incident was sparked by the death of two 31-year-old female employees in a textile factory. According to their colleagues, workers were forced to work 14 to 16 hours a day, seven days a week. The average monthly wage, approximately $200, was much lower than what they were promised – $300 to $600 – by the employment agencies.

Another similar incident occurred in February 2006 in South Africa. Two dozen female workers went on strike for a week, protesting wage delinquency and rude treatment by their bosses.

The third type is illegal immigrants. It is hard to estimate their number, especially in a place like Africa. Yet, stories about their misfortune make it to the front page of the Chinese press from time to time. Most of the illegal immigrants are recruited by illegal travel agencies who promise high wages, charge an amount of $6,000 to $10,000, and help applicants to apply for tourist visas.

Earlier this year, 220 such migrant workers went on a sit-in strike in front of Chinese Embassy in Liberia. Each of them paid $9,000 to an illegal agency for employment with $600 to $800 monthly salary in a meat factory in Liberia. Upon their arrival, they found out that such a factory never existed. They wandered around the country for more than a year, and could not find any opportunity for employment.

Hundred of thousands of Chinese workers in Africa, legal or illegal, have presented new challenges to both the Chinese and the African governments.

In Africa, resentment toward the Chinese labor practice is increasingly visible. Many African countries have a high unemployment rate and want the Chinese-run firms to hire more local workers. Labor unions in several nations have issued statements accusing the Chinese of taking away local jobs while robbing the local natural resources, violating labor standards and labor law, and deepening the existing corruption. This has become a major political issue in several countries with democratically elected governments.
The Chinese companies, on the contrary, prefer to bring their own workforce. They bring their mentality and business practice from China, ignoring the local civil society, and focusing on working with the governments. Furthermore, they openly discriminate against the African labor forces, and are very hostile to labor unions and labor rights organizations. He Jianping, a legendary businessman who made his fortune in Mozambique, warned his fellow Chinese: "The labor law in one of the least developed countries, Mozambique, allows labor union when a firm hires more than 50 local employees. The law protects the right to strike… Many Chinese firms did not deal with labor relations well, which leads to labor dispute."

His point can be validated by an incident in Zambia, when African workers in a Chinese-owned copper mine went on strike, demanding higher pay and better working conditions. The strike turned into a riot. Local media reported that a Chinese manager fired at the crowd and injured people. The Chinese firm was forced to settle the dispute.

Other problems have also emerged. Several companies and employment agencies have been sued by the returned workers. Some of the sensational lawsuits are covered by the media. This in turn encourages more lawsuits.

China also tries to redefine the role of its diplomats in mediating labor disputes and assisting Chinese citizens. The National People’s Congress has started the legislation process to enhance the function of protecting its own citizen by embassies. Although this process may not necessarily lead to more recognition of labor rights, it will help to regulate the often unruly labor practices employed by Chinese firms in Africa.