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Written statement* submitted by Association pour la défense des droits de l'homme et des revendications démocratiques/culturelles du peuple Azerbaidjanais-Iran - «ARC», a non-governmental organization in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[9 August 2022]

* Issued as received, in the language of submission only.



Strikes by Sungun Copper Mine Workers, Varzigan, East Azerbaijan, Iran (Islamic Republic of)

This Statement by ArcDH informs the 51st session of Human Rights Council on the ongoing wave of strikes by the workers of the Sungun Copper Mine in Varzigan, East Azerbaijan, Iran (Islamic Republic of). Iranian President, Raisi, visited Tabriz, as well as the Sungun Copper Mine, at the surge of the ongoing strikes in early July 2022. Purportedly, he made numerous promises such as the establishment of the Azerbaijan Copper Industries Company and addressed the demands of the workers. But what is happening despite the Iranian propaganda?

Overview of Economic Situation in Iran (Islamic Republic of)

The economy in Iran (Islamic Republic of) is in deep crisis due to systemic corruptions, inept management, the inefficiency of the government and international sanctions due to its nuclear ambitions. The official inflation rate is more than 40%, and due to the devaluation of the national currency, the price of necessary goods increases every day, pushing the working classes and salary earners below the poverty line.

Since the last year, almost every day, there are protests and strikes in Azerbaijani cities as well as other cities in Iran (Islamic Republic of Iran) driven by skyrocketing prices. Protestors demand salaries to match price rises or prices be controlled by the government. Surprisingly, the government plays by marginal issues, such as the hijab to evade public opinion and to overshadow the ongoing problems of tragic proportions. People are now convinced that the government ignores the barefoot and uses hijab-type issue to mask the ongoing crisis.

The economic crisis in non-Persian regions, including Azerbaijani provinces, is more severe than in central provinces and this stems from the lack of effective investments by the government. Therefore, there are more protests and strikes. Further drivers for the protests include destruction of the environment, indiscriminate exploitation of mines, failure to address the demands of workers, teachers, homeless people and those who have lost property and medical staff. Surprisingly, these protests are intentionally ignored by the official press. ArcDH strives to cover the protests and strikes of different sections of the people in Azerbaijan as much as it can and respond to the UN information requests.

Overview of the Sungun Copper Mine

The Sungun Copper Mine is the largest copper mine in the Middle East and about five thousand people work there. The mine reserves are estimated to be between 4 and 6 billion tons with a concentration of 61%, but the relevant authorities deliberately refrain from giving detailed information.

The Sungun Copper Mine is located 130 km northeast of Tabriz and located on the highlands of Qaradagh (Arsbaran) mountain range. The Mine also contains gold, silver and molybdenum, but due to the deliberate absence of processing industries in Azerbaijan, every year 300,000 tons of copper concentrate and ores are transported to Kerman some 2,000 km away or to China.

Working Conditions

About 1200 contract workers, suffering from insecure employment conditions and low wages, are employed by the Sungun Copper Mine. Each of these workers has about 20 years of experience in this job, but they still work with three-monthly contracts and despite the difficulty of working in the mine, they get a little salary of between 5 and 7 million Tomans (€200 - €400).

Now, 60 subcontracting companies are active in the Sungun Copper Mine which hires labour force as contract workers. The main contracting companies are Ajin Iron Company, Mobeen,

Neda, Innovation and Zahal. The strikers demand the removal of these subcontractors, who exploit the workers with minimum wages.

The Current Wave of Strikes

The strike was called in June and the workers responded on 25 June 2022.

On 27 June 2022 (the 3rd day of the strike), the Mine officials closed the kitchen door to the striking workers and denied their access to drinking water. Then, the police force attacked their gathering to disperse them. While suppressing them, six of their representatives were arrested and transferred to Ahar prison:

1. Ismail Izadkhah,
2. Saeed Jabarian,
3. Valilah Mahmoudi,
4. Arshad Kazempour, Jafarbaspour,
5. Mehrdad Monfared and
6. A worker named Khodai.

On 8 July 2022 (the 14th day of the strike), the commander of the regional police force came to calm down the striking workers but they refused to listen to him as he misrepresented the event the day before on the provincial radio and television network by denying the beating of the workers. Therefore, the workers continued their protests and demanded the release of their representatives.

Since then, it emerged that the detentions continued and reached 20 more individuals, as well as Mr. Behnam Zarei, an Azerbaijani environmentalist(1) . It also points out that the detentions were the results of collusion between the management of the Mine, subcontractors and the government forces.

Labour Laws Applicable to Copper Miners

According to the Islamic Republic of Iran's labour law, the workers in any production unit with more than 50 workers have the right to form an Islamic labour council. However, Article 15 of the same law requires that the formation of a labour council is subject to the permission of the Supreme Labour Council in Tehran, if they are affiliated to the National Oil Company of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Steel Industry Companies and Copper Industry Companies in the Islamic Republic of Iran. Iranian authorities are obsessed by security issues and have not allowed the workers of the Sungun Copper Mine to form their labour unions. However, these workers select their representatives to communicate with their employers.

Iranian Discriminatory Practices against the Azerbaijanis

There is no limit to the discriminatory practices in the Islamic Republic of Iran and it even can be seen in mining industries. The cash-stricken Iranian authorities uses the natural resources in Azerbaijani provinces to attract foreign currency, exploiting them to bypass constricting sanctions by offering lucrative deals to foreign companies while ignoring their dirty mining practices. As a result, nothing but the destruction of the environment is received by Azerbaijan. Even no part of tax revenues on the mining industry are returned to Azerbaijani provinces. Only, the classic practices of exploitation performed on the colonial era can make it clear how Iran (Islamic Republic of) deals with Azerbaijan's mines.

For years, Azerbaijanis demanded the establishment of Azerbaijan Copper Company but the Iranian government officials never took a serious step other than a few false promises. Yet another promise of this nature was made during the president's visit to the Sungun Copper Mine. However, not only no specific time has been set for the establishment of Azerbaijan Copper Company, the required legal revenue from Sungun Copper Mine has never been

allocated to the regional development! Moreover, 1% of its revenue, which should be spent to prevent environmental degradation, has not been allocated during the last six years. Heavy mining trucks are destroying the roads of Azerbaijan, but so far, the commitment of National Copper Industries Company of the Islamic Republic of Iran to build a highway between Varziqan and Khoja has not been implemented.

Several plans for the establishment of a copper industry complex and a solar power plant for the consumption within the mines have not been carried out yet. The mine uses region's electricity 24 hours a day causing electricity shortages during hot summers and cold winters. Indiscriminate exploitation and failure to allocate a proportion of the income from the mine to the region has angered the people. They consider this huge mine activity as the looting of natural resources of Azerbaijanis on behalf of wealth, courtesy of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Avoiding the establishment of the appropriate industries in Azerbaijani provinces and depriving Azerbaijanis from thousands of job opportunities are clear evidence for the discriminatory practices against Azerbaijanis in the Islamic Republic of Iran, as well as structural corruption in the decision-making system and the economic turmoil. Even Azerbaijani officials and members of Iranian parliament are outspoken on this issue but no result is achieved yet.

Despite this huge wealth, the villages around Sungun copper mines are deprived of even trivial facilities such as standard schools, piped safe water, electricity, and tarmac roads.

The Sad Portray of the Natives in relation to Mining Prospects

In addition to the protests of the workers of the Sungun Copper Mine, Azerbaijanis have called to put an end to the sale of raw materials and the looting of Azerbaijani mines for years. Iranian government is fully offensive against Azerbaijani natural resources knowing that 58% of metal mines of the country are located in Azerbaijani provinces, and Qaradagh (Arasbaran) mountains are the continuation of the copper and gold belt. Dozens of large copper and gold mines are located in East Azerbaijan province. There is also evidence that some non-native people related to the government have privileges on exploiting those mines, while normally the government avoids to give permission to the native Azerbaijanis to exploit them. So, despite all this natural wealth, the youth in Azerbaijan have to leave their homeland and migrate to remote areas to find job.

1 - <https://ir.voanews.com/a/strike-workers-arrest-inflation-iran/6658519.html>