

Mining in Eritrea: Nevsun accused of turning blind eye to forced labour

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For the conscripts who were ordered to work at a Canadian gold mine in Eritrea, the conditions were nearly unbearable: 12-hour shifts, six days a week, with poor food and no toilets, for a salary of less than \$15 a month.

When one conscript left the mine without permission to attend a grandparent's funeral, he was captured and imprisoned for four months, and then forced back into his unit.

These are among the allegations in a hard-hitting report by Human Rights Watch, to be released Tuesday, which criticizes the Canadian mining company for failing to prevent the use of forced labour at its mine. The report is based on interviews with former workers at the mine, who later fled the country.

The Vancouver-based company, Nevsun Resources Ltd., responded to questions from The Globe and Mail by saying that it expresses "regret" for any forced labour at its mine in Eritrea. It said it doesn't permit conscripted labour at its mine today, but doesn't know whether its subcontractor used conscripts in the past.

The allegations highlight the ethical and moral challenges for Canadian mining companies when they operate in countries with long histories of human rights abuses. And it raises the question of whether Canadian companies can develop mines in countries such as Eritrea without becoming complicit in those abuses.

Human Rights Watch, an independent group based in New York, said some companies, including Canadian companies, are failing to do enough to prevent the use of forced labour. The report is titled "Hear No Evil."

Eritrea, located in the Horn of Africa, is one of the world's most repressive and secretive countries. It has never held a national election since its independence in 1993, and Human Rights Watch has said the country is becoming "a giant prison" of torture, arbitrary arrest and forced labour.

Eritrea also enjoys vast mineral resources, which are luring a number of mining companies from Canada, Australia and China.

Nevsun is the operator and majority owner of the Bisha mine, the first and only modern mine in Eritrea today. The mine employs nearly 1,000 people and produced about 313,000 ounces of gold in 2012, making it one of the biggest contributors to Eritrea's impoverished economy. It provides nearly a quarter of the national gross domestic product.

"There are always tradeoffs in where you're working," Nevsun president Cliff Davis told The Globe and Mail in 2011 when he was asked about Eritrea's human-rights abuses.

"As a mining company, we shouldn't be imposing some form of political environment that we're familiar with," Mr. Davis said.

The company said it was required to hire an Eritrean company, Segen Construction, as a major subcontractor at the mine. Segen is owned by Eritrea's ruling party. Nevsun said it was not permitted to hire any other contractor for certain construction jobs at the site, and it was not permitted to do the work itself.

"The company expresses regret if certain employees of Segen were conscripts four years ago," Nevsun said in a statement.

The company said it became aware in 2009 that Segen might be employing conscripts from Eritrea's system of mandatory national service. It says it obtained a written guarantee from Segen that it would not use conscripts at the mine. There are currently 140 Segen employees at the mine, but all will leave by August when their current work is finished, the company said.

Human Rights Watch says Nevsun tried to investigate the forced-labour allegations, but Segen stonewalled the investigation and prohibited Nevsun from interviewing its workers or inspecting their camp. "Its response to Segen's stonewalling has been one of quiet acceptance," Human Rights Watch said.

After the Eritrean government promised to refrain from using forced labour at the mine, Nevsun "did not put adequate safeguards in place to ensure that this agreement was honoured," the report said.

Human Rights Watch said it interviewed four Eritreans who worked at the mine, and each provided "detailed and credible" accounts of forced labour and terrible living conditions. One said the conscripts were clearly emaciated, and another said they were "dehumanized."

The former workers said Segen told the conscripts that they were forbidden to speak to any foreigners. They lived in a "climate of fear," the report said.

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