

With the government reluctant to ratify ILO C176, Pakistan's miners are condemned to work in death traps

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Mohammad Israr, 17, says that he prays with a heavy heart every time he enters the deadly coal mine in the mineral-rich, south-western province of Balochistan that claimed the life of his father. "My father worked in coal mines for over two decades, but ever since his death over a year ago, I had to quit my studies and leave my home to come and work here as a miner," Israr tells *Equal Times*.

With his basic knowledge of Arabic writing and a short background of religious studies, Israr has written various holy verses on the stained black entrance of the mine with white chalk as an omen for good luck and safety. "Our wholesale reliance is on Allah. Nothing else can protect us here," says Israr, a native of the former Taliban stronghold of Swat Valley in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, northern Pakistan, which is over 1,600 kilometres away.

Israr labours for at least 10 hours a day as a helper underground, and occasionally as a coal loader. The work earns him around US\$10 per day, but it is exhausting and perilous. Adapting to the extreme temperatures of Balochistan, where it plummets below zero in the winter and routinely exceeds 40°C in the warmer months, as well as the life-threatening work of small-scale mining, has been physically and mentally very hard for the teenager.

But Israr has no choice. "I have to pay back the loans that we took out to pay for things when my father died, and I have to help look after my nine siblings and my mother. There is no other work available," he tells *Equal Times*.

According to the [BP Statistical Review of World Energy 2020](#), Pakistan has some of the largest coal reserves in the world (3,064 million tonnes), and coal is used to power everything from [brick kilns](#) to cement factories to electricity power plants. But coal mining in Pakistan is incredibly dangerous.

Reliable data is hard to come by as most workers are informal and work attendance registers at the mines are poorly maintained, but at least 100 mine workers lose their lives every year ; in 2020, [it is estimated that 208 mine workers died in Pakistan](#). Thousands more are injured and an untold number develop serious illnesses and diseases as a result of their work.

The mines tend to be operated by small and medium-sized mining groups, or individuals, many of whom operate on a short-term basis with a sole focus on profit-maximisation. With so many informal enterprises numbers vary, but there are thought to be [over 3,000 registered coal mines in Balochistan](#), engaging over 40,000 miners. Pakistan's miners are mostly subcontracted, doing manual or semi-mechanised work in privately owned mines which receive little technological investment because the cost is shouldered by mine owners who do not want to impact their profit

margins. The government offers little to no legal, financial, technological or social support to mine owners.

The hours are long, up to 14 hours a day, and while it is illegal for workers under the age of 18 to be engaged in hazardous work in Pakistan, [child labour in the mining industry is common](#), and children as young as 14 years old can be found working underground. There are few health and safety measures for mine workers, little or no training, no paid holidays, no health insurance, and very low wages.

The precarity faced by Pakistan's mine workers is compounded by the fact that many are migrants, either from the impoverished Khyber Pakhtunkhwa regions of Swat and Shangla, which were previously marred by the Taliban insurgency and suffer from chronic underdevelopment, or from neighbouring Afghanistan. The latter group of workers mostly work and live in Pakistan without valid papers, which puts them at the mercy of rogue mine bosses, some of whom habitually underpay migrant workers, or don't pay them at all.

Now in his early fifties, Amin Ullah was just 15 when he left his village in Shangla to come to Balochistan to work as a miner. "I have dodged death many times but many of my fellow workers – some of whom were my friends and relatives – could not survive in the mines," he says, sombre with grief.

The inadequate salary of approximately US\$250 per month means that workers like Amin cannot afford to take leave to visit their family. "The last time I visited my home in Shangla was in 2014. I have missed so many Eids [the Muslim holy festival] and so much more. It is heart-breaking."

Time to address the safety crisis

Despite the horrifying death toll in 2020, 2021 could be an even worse year for mine safety. The year started in ignominy with a spate of mine accidents, including [the deaths of at least 15 coal miners](#) in two separate incidents less than a week apart after trapped methane gas exploded into ferocious fires inside mines in western Balochistan. In February, four coal miners died following a mine collapse in Duki district, Balochistan. And on 25 December 2020, six coal miners were trapped inside another mine in the same district.

The primitive extraction methods employed in most coal mines means that workers risk death or serious injuries from gas explosions, mine wall collapses, floods, and equipment-related accidents. Occupational diseases such as black lung (an incurable but preventable illness caused by inhaling coal mine dust), hearing loss, spinal cord disorders caused by the continuous vibration of equipment, sight disorders, and tuberculosis, are common.

The provision of rescue equipment, methane gas detection equipment and proper ventilation are all in short supply or poorly maintained. It is the same for fire-fighting services, hospitals, ambulances and pharmacies, none of which can be found within easy reach of the mines. Effective health and safety monitoring mechanisms are also severely lacking – there is only one chief mine inspector for the whole of Balochistan, and he only makes 10 visits a month according to [a 2019 National Commission for Human Rights-Pakistan report](#). A [2018 article for Dawn](#), one of Pakistan's leading newspapers, further states that "despite 45 documented incidents resulting in more than 318 deaths in the last eight years, the Chief Inspector Mines of Balochistan has not prosecuted even a single mine owner/manager for criminal negligence".

But neither the government nor the mine owners have committed to taking the necessary steps to improve working conditions for Pakistan's miners. Veteran labour rights activist, Karamat Ali, says

that Pakistan's mine workers endure "inhuman conditions". He tells *Equal Times* : "We strongly demand that the government in Pakistan ratifies the International Labour Organization (ILO) Convention 176 (C176) on mine safety, which we hope will create the right framework to address the safety crisis."

C176, which is also known as the Safety and Health in Mines Convention, was adopted at the ILO's 82nd International Labour Conference in 1995. It recognizes that there are inherent hazards in the mining workplace, and aims to create a standard that can be used by any ratifying nation to promote the health and safety of miners.

However, Pakistan has so far chosen not to ratify C176. "Unfortunately, all political parties and the current government in particular are anti-labour and elitist," says Ali. "Not only do they oppose pro-labour conventions, but they remain reluctant to implement those already ratified such as ILO C98 [editor's note : The Right to Organise and Collective Bargaining Convention of 1949, which is one of eight fundamental ILO conventions]," says Ali, who has been a part of the labour and peace movements in Pakistan for over five decades, and is the founding member of various local and regional networks such as the South Asia Labour Forum. "The rate of union formation in Pakistan is below two percent," he adds.

IndustriAll, the Geneva-based global union federation representing over 50 million workers in 140 countries, has been working with local trade unions to campaign for the ratification and implementation of ILO C176 in Pakistan. Tanveer Nazir, IndustriALL's Pakistan project coordinator, tells *Equal Times* that a lack of investment and poor regulation of the sector is behind what IndustriALL's assistant general secretary Kemal Özkan describes as the sector's "[shameful carnage](#)". Nazir says : "Despite technological advancement around the world, coal mine operators and owners here do not want to budge from their dangerous, archaic methods of mining," he explains.

"The government has neglected to regulate and register coal mines and those who work in them. It has also failed to enforce strict safety measures for colliers, let alone invest in safety equipment for rescue workers and inspectors. Unfortunately, a large number of coal mines are operated informally by small or large mafias who use their influence to keep out government safety inspectors and to avoid giving mandatory compensation to workers families in case of injury or death."

One of the main hurdles to the ratification of C176 has been the country's federal structure and weak state. Although some observers say that the central government is not opposed to ratifying the convention, local miner owners put huge amounts of pressure on local governments not to do so, and for the convention to be effective, it will need to be strictly implemented by provincial governments after it has been ratified by the federal government.

Facing occupational accidents - and terrorism

Most of the coal mining in Pakistan happens in Balochistan, where sovereignty is contested between the state and tribal leaders. When contacted, the government spokesperson in Balochistan, Liaqat Shahwani, told *Equal Times* that Pakistan's 1923 Mines Act covers most of the issues related to mining. He, however, acknowledged that matters such as workers' rights to report accidents, the right to select health and safety representatives, and worker trainings, are not covered by this act.

"Balochistan needs support from the international community regarding the safety of mine workers and training programmes. It also needs investors to establish the manufacturing and industry-wide availability of health and safety equipment such as gas detectors, self-rescuers, breathing apparatus," which are generally imported from abroad and maintained using foreign expertise.

But the unions say that much more needs to be done. IndustriALL's Nazir says that the 1923 Mines Act is not enough to protect miners because after the [18th Constitutional Amendment](#) in 2010, which curtailed the powers of the president and federal government, Pakistan's provincial governments have the ultimate authority to enact and implement any legislation. "In Pakistan the legislation process is also very difficult due to political instability," says Nazir.

Parallel to the relentless spate of deadly accidents in the coal mines, pro-Islamic State terrorists and ethnic Baloch separatists also pose a grim threat to mine workers who come from the northern parts of Pakistan as well as the Shia communities of the central highlands of neighbouring Afghanistan.

The [remains of 16 coal miners were discovered in a mass grave](#) in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa on 9 April, nearly a decade after they went missing. The area where they were found was once a stronghold of the Pakistani Taliban, but residents say that both militants and Pakistani security forces were carrying out abductions and murders at the time of the miners' disappearance, the latter as part of its anti-terrorist operations.

Weeks before the discovery of the bodies, gunmen associated with a local group of pro-Islamic State terrorists brutally killed 11 ethnic Hazara workers, [a long-persecuted Shia minority group](#) in Pakistan and Afghanistan, in the Mach district of Balochistan. The group claimed responsibility for blindfolding and eventually trussing the workers in their communal compound near the mines they used to work in.

Mohammad Ali, a co-worker of Israr, said the massacre of Hazara mine workers in Mach has furthered the trauma endured by Balochistan's coal miners. "The sword of death always hangs over our heads inside the coal mine as it can collapse over us anytime, but the killing of workers in their sleeping compounds at night just proves that we are not safe anywhere," the 20-year-old told *Equal Times*.

Members of the Hazara community believe the incident in Mach was identical to the targeted killing of its members because of their religious beliefs in other parts of Pakistan and Afghanistan. They staged [a sit-in protest](#) with the dead bodies of the mine workers for days in a desperate demand for security.

This prompted Prime Minister Imran Khan to assure the reeling Hazara community that he would ensure their safety while dubbing the massacre an attempt to instigate sectarian violence in the country. "I share your pain & have come to you before also to stand with you in your time of suffering. [...] I will never betray my people's trust," [he tweeted](#).

Many ethnic Hazara mine workers hail from central Afghanistan's Hazarajat region. In a conversation with *Equal Times*, members of the community said they fled Afghanistan to escape war and persecution, and due to a lack of proper documentation, their only option for work was in illegal mining. "We are made to work for longer hours and in treacherous conditions, but what can we do? We cannot raise our voice or seek justice," says one Afghan coal mine worker.

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