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Senator Jeff Merkley
Opening Statement: CECC Hearing
“From Cobalt to Cars: How China Exploits Child and Forced Labor in the Congo”
November 14, 2023

Thank you very much, Chairman Smith, for convening this hearing, which builds on several hearings that this Commission has held on the issue of forced labor and other abuses, including child labor, in supply chains dominated by Chinese companies, and the importance of holding them accountable when they are complicit in human rights violations.

This Commission regularly spotlights the repression of the Chinese government, whether within their own borders, such as in Xinjiang or Hong Kong, or through efforts to reach across borders into other countries, including right here in the United States.

Today, we will hear about how those two forms of repression are entwined in the cobalt supply chain originating in the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

Cobalt is a critical component in lithium-ion batteries, which are used in everything from cell phones to electric cars, as well as other industrial and defense applications.

Almost half of the world’s known reserves of cobalt – 3.4 metric tons – is in southern DRC, and the country accounts for roughly 70 percent of global production.

A whopping 80 percent of the DRC’s cobalt output is owned by Chinese companies, refined in China, and sold to companies in the United States, Europe, and elsewhere for use in batteries and other equipment.

So-called “artisanal” cobalt mines, which remain largely unregulated despite some efforts by the DRC government to formalize the sector, operate alongside larger industrial operations.

Artisanal miners often include women and children, who work for the equivalent of a dollar or two a day, carrying heavy loads out of dangerous mines, and children as young as three learn to sift through the stones to wash and sort ore.

The U.S. Department of Labor estimates that at least 25,000 children are working in cobalt mines in the DRC.

And they do it without basic protective equipment, like gloves or facemasks.

A study in The Lancet found that women living in areas where cobalt mines are concentrated “had metal concentrations that are among the highest ever reported for pregnant women,” with heavy metals linked to stillbirths and birth defects.

Cobalt mining also causes enormous environmental degradation from large-scale, open-pit mines as ordinary people tear up the ground looking for cobalt, then following the veins wherever they lead, including under homes and churches.

It isn’t just cobalt – the DRC is also a top producer of other minerals that are vital components in batteries and other advanced technologies, like copper and “rare earth” metals.

Facilitated by widespread corruption in the DRC’s mining sector, Chinese companies and the Chinese government directly profit from forced and child labor used to mine these minerals, extending their abusive practices across continents.

And they supply American companies that produce products we use every day.

American consumers deserve to be protected from becoming unwitting and unwilling accomplices in these abuses.

All of these issues have enormous implications for our supply chains, at every step, as we seek to accelerate the transition to a clean, sustainable energy future.

American companies, and those in likeminded countries, have leverage over these tainted supply chains, which they can and must exert to improve transparency and implement responsible sourcing.

And both the Executive Branch and Congress have important roles to play to reduce and ultimately eliminate labor and other human rights abuses in DRC mining operations.

Addressing these issues is an opportunity for the United States to lead the world in both clean, sustainable energy and in human rights.

I look forward to learning more about this set of problems and what we can do to address them from our witnesses.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

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