

## **Plight of a Zambian mine accident victim**

*Article by Jessie Ngoma Simengwa (Zambia)*

It's a little over one year since Chali Chisanga, an electrician at a Zambian mine, was involved in an accident that changed his life.

The sour memories of the fateful April 23, 2007 night still linger on his mind and are strengthened by the fact that Mr Chisanga has known little apart from hospital visits since he suffered forty-eight-degree burns on his face, arms and legs that threaten to leave him permanently scarred. He has not worked since the accident because he has been undergoing a variety of medical treatments including skin grafts.

Mr Chisanga is employed by Chambishi Metals, a mine in Zambia's Copperbelt Province and was at the time of the accident operating from the smelter as an electrician. He got injured in a blast caused by an abnormality in voltage and spent the next three days in a mine hospital in a neighbouring town, Luanshya. However, because his burns were severe doctors recommended his transfer to Milpark Hospital in South Africa for specialised medical attention.

And that has been his lifestyle for over one year, nursing his health.

In the aftermath of the accident, the Mines Safety Department ordered the closure of the smelter and over 160 employees at the mine protested, demanding the removal of the smelter manager.

Mine Workers Union of Zambia president Rayford Mbulu said after visting the mine that the company had installed new equipment that was possibly being used on experimental basis. However, Chambishi Metals chief executive officer Derek Webbstock swiftly dismissed the allegation because "our operators are adequately trained before we commission new equipment".

New mine owners in the country have many times been asked to observe safety and environmental standards. The Mines Safety Department shows fluctuating statistics on accidents and fatalities from the year 2000 to 2006. From 399 accidents in 2000, nine workers died while 23 died in 370 accidents the following year. There were more fatalities in 2005, when there were 80 deaths from 312 accidents, but the number went down in 2006, when 18 workers died in 270 accidents.

According to the International Labour Organization (ILO), the UN agency dealing with labour questions, work-related accidents and diseases continue to be a serious problem in both developed and developing countries. The ILO estimates that workers suffer 270 million accidents every year. There are at least 335,000 fatal injuries caused by accidents at work. In some industries in Zambia, a number of hiccups have been identified but there is less attention on matters of occupational health and safety, in keeping with International Labour Standards.

International Labour Standards are legal instruments drawn up by ILO's constituents — representatives of governments, employers, and workers — setting out basic principles and rights at work. They are relevant to unions and employers as they respond to a growing number of needs and challenges faced by workers and employers in the global economy.

Despite the existence of the Factories Act in Zambia, some industries pursue higher production targets and profits at the expense of the welfare of workers.

Some workers interviewed in the Copperbelt town of Ndola, who wanted their identities to be withheld, said many accidents and poor health are caused by unsafe and risky work conditions. While some have unsatisfactory protective clothing, others are compelled to acquire such from their own resources.

Safety inspections and periodical medical check-ups have gone down in the post-privatisation era. Fire extinguishers at some workplaces are available but some workers showed ignorance about their use because they have not received any training or awareness. In some industries where ink or chemicals are used, workers have no gloves and other forms of protective clothing.

A 'Decent Work Country Programme' 2007 report on Zambia validated by the Ministry of Labour and Social Security, Zambia Federation of Employers, Zambia Congress of Trade Unions, and the Federation of Free Trade Unions in Zambia states that since it joined the ILO in 1964, Zambia has ratified a total of 43 Conventions from which 39 are currently in force.

In 1999, the government ratified the Safety and Health in Mines Convention (No. 176). However a Ministry of Labour official says that when Zambia's economy went down, it became difficult to ratify more ILO Conventions, especially on occupational safety and health.

The official says the Ministry did not have capacity to train medical personnel, it was operating on a thin budget, and it had no measuring equipment as well as motor vehicles to enable it conduct on-the-spot inspections. "The ILO expects member countries to report back on ratified Conventions year after year, but since we didn't have technical support it was not possible for us to ratify more Conventions. At one stage the entire Mines Safety Department only had two inspectors after a mass exodus of staff for greener pasture in neighbouring countries." However, the official says there is now much improvement as some motor vehicles have been acquired, more inspectors employed and equipment bought. Despite Zambia's efforts to ratify some Conventions on safety, much still needs to be done on ILS, which play an important role in the elaboration of national laws, policies and judicial decisions, and in the provisions of collective bargaining agreements.

As regards individual direct request on the application of the Safety and Health in Mines Convention, 1995 (No. 176), submitted by the Committee of Experts on the Application of Conventions and Recommendations to Zambia in 2008, the Committee notes with regret that the government's report has not been received.

It hopes that a report will be supplied for examination by the Committee at its next session and that it will contain full information on the matters raised in its previous direct request. The Committee, however, takes note of the information contained in the Government's first report and notes with interest that the government intends to revise its mining laws to meet the requirements of Articles 13 and 15 of the Convention and that it is also engaged in the process of revising the Factories and Workplaces Act, in respect of which comments have been made on the draft legislation by the ILO.

That may inspire hope in the workers in the manner matters of safety and health are treated in the mines.

For now, however, Mr Chisanga's employers have backpedalled on his medical treatment in South Africa, preferring him to be attended to by local doctors. The reason? His employers said it was too costly to continue sending him abroad for treatment. His worry is that he is being made to change doctors in an uncoordinated manner that may predispose him to other complications. Worse still, Mr Chisanga laments that in his current condition, with some metals inserted in his foot to fasten his bones, he may never work as an electrician again.