

Philippine Occupational Health and Safety Brief

The occupational health and safety situation in the Philippines is far from being admirable, to say the least. To attract foreign investments and grab a bigger share of the market, companies operating in the Philippines continue with their race to the bottom. More and more workers are suffering from poor working conditions, with no protection whatsoever, while their wages and benefits are driven to insanely low levels. The cost of living is around Php 800/day (~ USD 17) for a family of 6 while the minimum wage is Php 365/day (~USD 8). Most of the workers belong to the working poor.

With social service taking the last priority, proper health care and housing for workers is a big wish waiting to come true. Health care spending of the government is Php 9/year (~USD 0.19) for every Filipino, while a 500 mg paracetamol tablet already costs PhP 3.50 (~USD 0.07).

OHS in the Philippines

Occupational accidents resulting to death increased by 69.7% from 2000 to 2002 but overall statistics are going down as reported by the government through the Bureau of Labor and Employment Statistics (BLES). In 2000 there were 68,691 accidents while in 2002 it was 46,661 or a 32% decline. But such statistics can be misleading since under-reporting and poor coverage of enterprises are prevalent in developing countries as stated by a report of the ILO, meaning the numbers can only go up. According to the ILO, some countries account only 10% (lowest) of the accidents, while coverage can be as low as 30%. Such can be true to the Philippines.

In 2002, the Bureau of Working Conditions (BWC) stated that there were only 59 accredited workplace inspectors assigned to monitor more than 700,000 registered enterprises. Each inspector, to provide at least 80% coverage must check 9,492 firms a year or 32/day.

OHS and Mining

Large-scale mining in the Philippines is dangerous both to miners and the environment. The International Labor Organization considers mining as the most unsafe human activity. The social and environmental cost of mining is immeasurable.

The Philippines is rich in natural resources. It is 2nd to Indonesia in geological prospectivity in South East Asia, 2nd to South Africa in gold production, 3rd in copper production, 3rd in gold, 4th in copper deposits, 5th in nickel deposits and 6th in chromite in nickel deposits.

Surprisingly, the mining sector employs only a fraction of the total labor force in the country. According to the July 2006 Philippine government census, 134,000 are employed in the mining and quarrying sector, comprising a mere 0.4% of the total employed. But this will soon change.

Since the Supreme Court reversed its decision on the Mining Act of 1995, 100% ownership of mining firms is now allowed. According to the Roadmap for the Philippine Minerals Industry released by the Mines and Geosciences Bureau (MGB) in 2003, by the year 2009, there will be 455 Exploration Permits or 1,685% increase from the number in 2005. In the same document, the number of Mineral Production Sharing Agreements is expected to have a 560% increase from the present 228, reaching an estimated total of 1,275, with mine exports reaching USD 2B or a 243% increase compared to USD 820M total exports in 2005. The MGB is also expecting employment in the sector to reach 590,000 by 2009 or a 440% jump.

Various hazards, fatal and non-fatal, are faced by miners every minute during their work. A couple of weeks ago 4 miners in Benguet, were trapped to death after a private mine collapsed, burying the miners. In 2005, 50 miners in Compostela Valley were buried alive after the mine collapsed. Fatal accidents in mining areas usually comes out in the newspapers but what is being hidden from the public eye are the occupational health and safety issues in mining, which have short and long term effects and can be equally fatal as those mentioned above.

Regular exposure to various chemicals used to leach minerals from the raw ore is a major health threat. Sodium cyanide is used to leach gold from the ore. Cyanide blocks the transfer of oxygen from the blood to the body tissues. Acute effects include rapid breathing, gasping, tremors, convulsions and death. Effects of sublethal poisoning include headache, dizziness and thyroid enlargement.

Mines exposes workers to different types of airborne particulates, making them vulnerable to systemic toxic effects due to the absorption of lead, manganese, cadmium, zinc and other toxic material. Acute effects of lead poisoning are seizures, headaches, dizziness, memory deficit, nausea and miscarriage. Chronic effects includes pallor, seizures, memory loss, wrist/foot drop and renal failure.

Due to the nature of underground mining, miners are constantly exposed to intense heat while hydration is very limited. Miners usually have fluid and salt deficiency due to constant sweating, increased stress on the heart, heat stroke, opacity of the lens and reduced fertility due to high heat. Poor ventilation robs the body of needed oxygen causing the brain to malfunction and leads to many deaths especially in underground operations like what happened in Benguet.

Challenges ahead for OHS

Globalization has wrecked havoc to workers and economies around the world. The gulf between the rich and poor nations continuously grows, leaving millions of people in miserable and desperate conditions.

In order to attract foreign investments, especially those coming to China, the Philippine government further loosened the already lax control for foreign companies. Labor rights like the right to form unions and the right to strike was thrown overboard. Workers attempting to organize unions were dealt with an iron fist. Up to date, 76 unionist and labor activists have been murdered due to their organizing work. We must build strong solidarity amongst the workers around Asia and the world.

Our work on OHS would be wasted if workers are not able to organize themselves and form union, not only to promote OHS but also protect other labor rights. Workers are afraid to tell management their health status due to fear of being laid-off and replaced by "healthier" workers. Seeking compensation from the management can even be more problematic since cases can drag for so long. Without a strong union to support individual workers seeking redress, management will just brush them aside. We must help in organizing workers.

Philippine law do not answer the problems of workers, specifically OHS. In 2004 instead of increasing the number of inspectors from its current number of 59, the DoLE issued Department Order (D.O.) 57-04 stipulating companies with more than 200 workforce just have to do self-assessment and is no longer required for inspection. Companies are expected to fill-up an working condition assessment form and submit that to the BWC. The second group of firms with 10-199 workers will be inspected on a per-request-basis, while those with less than 10 shall be

given advise on how to improve working conditions. Workplace inspectors must be increased and penalties for companies violating standards must also be increased.

Compensation for accident victims must also be developed. The Employment Compensation Commission (ECC) provides monetary compensation for workers figuring in accidents causing permanent and temporary disabilities. The ECC have reported their financial difficulties since they are merely borrowing money from the Social Security System (SSS) and monetary compensation usually are small and late. There are no program for re-integration of workers who figured in occupational accidents.

Information on OHS amongst workers is very low. The dominant understanding is by merely wearing personal protective equipment (PPE), workers are already safe from workplace hazards. The Government is partly to blame since their framework in OHS is merely promoting PPE. There is a greater need to promote the hierarchy of control in OHS, that is : 1) eliminate the hazard, 2) substitution for less dangerous, 3) isolate the hazard, 4) engineering control, 5) administrative control, 6) provide PPE. Training more OHS representatives from the ranks of workers is imperative.