

Lubumbashi, le 06 avril 2021

"Explosion of the sulphuric acid tanks of KCC, a subsidiary of Glencore, AFREWATCH denounces the negligence of the company and the complicity of the Congolese State and demands an investigation and reparation»

The African Natural Resources Watch (AFREWATCH), a non-governmental organization for the promotion and protection of human rights working in the natural resources sector, denounces and condemns Kamoto Copper Company (KCC)¹ for, on the one hand, having been at the root of the dumping of large quantities of sulfuric acid into Dikulwe and Luilu rivers, tributaries of the Congo River, and on the other hand, for not having informed the surrounding populations of this incident and its implications on health and the environment.

During the night of March 19 to 20, 2021, huge quantities of sulfuric acid from the KCC plant were spilled into several rivers, including Dikulwe and Luilu rivers, located between the NOA village and the Sapatelo Quarter. According to corroborating sources, this was the result of the explosion of the valves of the tanks containing sulfuric acid, which were placed in the cellar of the KCC plant. This incident is said to be due to a leak in one of the valves which remained unrepaired for a long time.

AFREWATCH notes that this incident occurred out of neglect, whereas it could have been avoided. For 17 days now, acids have been stagnating in the environment and others are being washed away by rainwater or streams. Since the incident, KCC agents have been collecting water from Luilu River on the Sapatelo-NOA axis three times a day.

AFREWATCH denounces the complicity of the Congolese State in this violation of the right to a healthy environment for the populations around KCC. When the facts were brought to their attention, the Congolese State merely dispatched a delegation from its Ministry of the Environment to the site without taking any binding measures against the company or informing the populations around of the incident and the measures to be taken to protect their health.

¹ KCC is a subsidiary of Glencore that mines copper and cobalt in the province of Lualaba. It uses acid oxidation leaching with sulfuric acid as the leaching agent.

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However serious the situation is and however high the level of nuisance is for the populations around and the physical environment, KCC took no relevant measures either to secure the site by limiting access and significantly reducing the effects of the acid, or to inform the population in order to protect them from any health risk related to the use of this water along the impacted waterways.

Despite the fact that lots of lime was poured on some affected areas, the situation is far from being under control. Acid fumes in the form of clouds can be seen until now on the surface of liquids of the discharge basins and from where the acid was dispersed in the rivers.

Several human damages have already been recorded, including cough and cold, chest pains and headache suffered by the workers present on the site and others who were involved in the intervention to mitigate the effects of the acid in the concession. In addition, the population of Sapatelo, downstream from Luilu River, also complained of suffocating odors, cough and cold, especially during in the evening.

In view of the above, AFREWATCH recommends

To the Government of Lualaba to:

- Set up an inter-ministerial commission of inquiry, composed of the Ministries of Mines, Environment and Health, whose mission will be to evaluate the degree of environmental pollution and determine the extent of the area affected by the acids;
- Publish the investigation report and inform the population around of the incident and all its health effects.

To KCC:

- Fix the public opinion about this incident and the implications that it may have on health and the physical environment;
- Start the process of cleaning up the affected area without delay;
- Provide medical treatment to the affected workers and the population and then repair the damage suffered by compensating them.

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