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World War Z: The Murder of a New Generation

A seventeen year-old girl, Nazneen climbs down a make-shift bamboo ladder through a make-shift, narrow, dirt tunnel about twenty meters long. As she shimmies her body farther down, the space grows increasingly dark and tight and the air is thick with dust. The tunnel, dug up by her cousins and father, has been fashioned for only one purpose—to collect mica. Daily, as Nazneen wriggles her body through the tight, dim, and clouded temporary shaft, she worries about getting trapped and suffocating *when* it collapses. After all, a few weeks ago, it happened to a girl, younger than she, in a nearby village. Nazneen hopes that “They’ll pull me out in time.” Even more, she summons up her courage to continue her descent as she contemplates, “If I were afraid, who would do the work?” Thankfully, Nazneen makes it out alive. However, success is not measured by safely emerging from the treacherous pit. It is only measured by how much mica she has managed to take out with her in a bucket. She hands the bucket to her cousin, who hands it to another cousin, until it reaches Nazneen’s father. Still, her job is not yet finished, with the help of her father, they sift through the haul of clay, dirt, rocks, and debris for pieces of mica under the beating sun. Seventeen year-old Nazneen no longer has a mother, so her father and she are the main providers for her family (Pfeil and Sharma). “In vast open-pits in Jharkhand, children as young as six squatted among glittering rocks scouring with their bare hands for shiny, brittle mica flakes, while older ones descended rickety ladders into shafts seeking better quality silicate. In Giridih’s Tisri area Basanti sifted through the reddish earth searching for pieces of

mica while her (ten)-year-old son Sandeep climbed into a rat-hole dug in the side of the hill and descended 3 meters (10 ft) to pound on the wall with a pick-ax. His mother said the skinny boy in checked shorts and a white T-shirt has been working in the mines since he was seven and, with his contribution, the family earns 300 rupees (\$4) daily” (Bhalla et al.).

Industries that rely on mica for production, Non-Government Organizations, NGO, that oversee illegal practices, and federal governments of importing countries, like the United States, and exporting countries, like India and Madagascar, have failed to stop child labor in mica mining, however, there is a glimmer of hope in exporting governments at the local level because they have the most direct and manageable access to create and oversee policies that eliminate the exploitative structures in their own marginalized communities. In order to understand why illegal child labor continues to exist in the mica mining industry, it is essential to first know what mica is and how it is used today.

Naturally formed mica is “any of a group of hydrous potassium, aluminum silicate minerals. It is a type of phyllosilicate, exhibiting a two-dimensional sheet or layer structure. Among the principal rock-forming minerals, micas are found in all three major rock varieties, igneous, sedimentary, and metamorphic” (Dietrich). Mica has many uses in many industries. For example, mica has physical, chemical, and electrical qualities that make it flexible, elastic, and infusible. It also has low thermal and electrical conductivity and electrical insulation. These characteristics make it an ideal component in the electronics and aerospace industries. In particular, mica is used for radio parts, sensors, insulators, paints, coatings, tires, and lithium-ion batteries. Mica can also be found in toasters, hairdryers, LED lights, acoustic guitars, smoke detectors, medical equipment, construction filler, plaster boards, paints and coatings, as it brightens the paint and helps to maintain a long shelf life for pigments, and makeup, as its

reflective and refractive properties make it an ideal component in blush, eye shadow, nail polish, and facial foundation (Cowan and Schipper). It is important to note that mica is a universal necessity. It is not only used in the daily conveniences and luxuries to which societies have grown accustomed, but it is also used in every piece of technological equipment. In an increasingly technology-reliant world, mica has become one of the most valuable commodities across all industries! After all, technology is increasingly replacing human labor, classrooms, brick and mortar stores, social venues, and much more.

The opening stories of the brutality of child labor are not uncommon ones. They are but two of countless more tragic stories, give or take a few details. Illegal mica mining relies on the labor of children as young as four years old, who are “typically tasked with collecting the dhibra, or mica, out of the old, narrow shafts, and filling about 10-kilo buckets with mica residue,” because they are small enough to fit into the spaces (Pfeil and Sharma). These old, narrow, deep, dark caves are not retrofitted for safety because they are supposed to be abandoned. As a result, there is no oversight governing them, and therefore, no legal accountability for any accidents that may occur in them. Many of these caves collapse on children, suffocating them to death! “In 2016, child protection group [Bachpan Bachao Andolan] BBA’s Jharkhand project coordinator Raj Bhushan told Reuters that many children die on a regular basis in mica mines. Although there are no official figures on child deaths in the mines, as it is all illegal, we hear about them through our networks in the villages where we work. Normally we hear about 10 fatalities on average a month, but in June [2016] we documented over 20 deaths” (Bhalla et al.). If the children make it out of the dangerous mines, they must heave the mica onto a chain of other children to an adult, who will dump “the buckets’ contents onto a pile.” From the pile, children

“sift by hand to separate the mica from soil and clay.” This laborious process earns them six “rupees for a kilo—the equivalent of eight US dollar cents” (Pfeil and Sharma).

Most of the illegal mica mining is perpetrated in Madagascar and India. Although Madagascar has surpassed India as the biggest exporter of sheet mica, India is still a primary source of mica, globally. In particular, eastern India in the Indian State of Jharkhand contains some of the richest stores of natural resources. Despite the resource richness of this state, it is the second economically poorest area of India (Madagascar’s Informal Economy Size). As a severely economically depressed population, it is no surprise that its residents are marginalized. This means that there is limited access to education, limited resources to leave their circumstances, and families must rely on every single able-bodied person in their communities to contribute to their survival. It is difficult to judge the parents of these children when survival or death frames the conditions of their lives. Unfortunately, the richness of the highly sought-after mica in the region, coupled with the some of the poorest and most malnourished of populations, has made Jharkhand a target for exploitation.

It is a difficult reality that atrocities like child labor still exist, as there are other industries where child labor has been essentially eliminated by company oversight, community watch groups, and legislation. “In 2010, the U.S. Department of Labor issued a report entitled List of Goods Produced by Child Labor or Forced Labor which lists one hundred twenty-eight products from seventy countries that have been documented to involve the use of child labor or forced labor. A few examples of goods or commodities imported to the U.S. that have been linked to child labor in recent years include, cut flowers from Colombia, coffee from Guatemala, Kenya, and other countries, vanilla from Madagascar, shrimp from Thailand, cashews from India, and bananas from Ecuador” (The University of Iowa Labor Center). Of the one hundred twenty-eight

products, mica is not one of them. By 2022, the United States added forty-two more products produced by child or forced labor. These include, cobalt used in batteries, acai berry used in the health juices of the moment, and gold. Even today, mica is still not on any of the “official” lists, perhaps because it is essential in the manufacturing of computer chips. Perhaps the rise in illegal mining areas in India during the Covid-19 pandemic is because of the necessity of even more computer chips across a multitude of industries. Since the 2016 creation of oversight committees by several different countries around the world who import mica, the number of illegal mines has actually tripled (Pfeil and Sharma)!

A large component that may contribute to the cover-up of illegal child labor is the lack of accountability in the chain of reporting the origins of mica. For example, officials may say that the collected mica originates from Rajasthan, India, where mines are allowed to operate legally, but the mica may very well come from Jharkhand. The Indian Bureau of Mines records that “19,000 tons of mica were mined in Jharkhand in 2021”(Pfeil and Sharma). However, Indian export statistics reveal that “150,000 tons of mica leave the country each year” (Pfeil and Sharma). In particular, a representative from Merck and Company, Inc., a United States pharmaceutical company, states that the company only sources mica from legal mines. According to data from The Indian Bureau of Mines, Merck is sourcing mica from three illegal mines (Bengtsen and Paddison)! In addition, Merck’s statement is tricky because, yes, they may not be sourcing from “illegal” mines, but that does not mean that they are necessarily sourcing by “legal” means. Child labor may still be going on in legal mines. It just means that the government approves child labor in these mica mines. “In the *International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy*, WORLD (WORLD Policy Analysis Center at the UCLA Fielding School of Public Health) analysis revealed that 41 countries do not protect children and youth under the

age of 18 from performing hazardous work—a number that rises to 74 when legal loopholes are taken into account” (Denly). Ultimately, it can be extrapolated that the real reason that exploitation exists is because entities are unwilling to lose their profits. There appears to be a direct relationship between the value of a resource and greed—the more valuable the resource is, the more exploitative the means to own it. No matter how often these companies claim that they are helping to combat the “illegal work of children,” there has been no actual evidence that supports their claims. According to the American multinational non-profit news agency, Associated Press, AP, “corporate public relations departments have also been assuring American consumers they wish to cleanse their supply chains of forced labor and child labor,” while conducting business contrary to their assurances (Hayward). This false humanitarian signaling is a marketing tool, so that these entities do not lose their customer base because of their greedy practices.

Another component that may contribute to the cover-up of illegal child labor may be found in the complicity of importing governments. According to Barbara Küppers of the children's charity Terre des Hommes, in a broad number of industries, where “hundreds” of children “have not survived the work in recent years, and many have been buried,” the majority of the cases are “not reported or have been covered up.” In these industries, importers, like the United States, have lobbyists who are paid professional advocates for specific companies who influence government representatives to make political decisions that work in the favor of those specific companies for whom they work. Unfortunately, lobbyists and government officials reciprocally trade special services, favors, money, and/or other commodities. For example, “The Associated Press (AP) reported that a coalition of major U.S. companies, including Walmart and General Motors, is quietly lobbying the government to make certain import data confidential—a

change that would make it much more difficult for journalists and human rights activists to link imported goods to abusive labor practices abroad, including forced labor in China's Xinjiang province and child labor in Africa" (Hayward). Specifically, U.S. Customs and Border Protection's, CBP, Commercial Customs Operations Advisory Committee, which is comprised of a variety of corporate representatives, want to "modernize" the import/export process by maintaining "confidential" vessel manifests. However, at this time, access to these shipping manifests are the only way to uncover where and how shipped goods are manufactured or harvested. So far, these manifests have been crucial in pressuring countries, particularly importing countries, to be accountable for supply chain choices. In addition, the Advisory Committee has proposed that importers be notified if their goods have been sourced by illegal means. A potential consequence may be the compromise of the safety of whistleblowers in the exporting countries. While the CBP has committed to "boost visibility into global supply chains, support ethical sourcing practices and level the playing field for domestic U.S. manufacturers," its Advisory Committee appears to be proposing legislation that runs counter to it (Hayward).

Although there appears to be some light in the darkness, unfortunately, it is more a mirage than a reality. The United States's involvement in all of this consists of updating its National Action Plan on Responsible Business Conduct on the basis of principles defined by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), an international organization that works to build better policies for better lives, Guidelines for Multinational Enterprises, and the United Nations Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights. Still, there has yet to be an official legislative approach. In 2017, the Responsible Mica Initiative, a coalition of more than seventy-five global companies, including BMW, Daimler, Porsche, BASF, Merck, L'Oreal, Shiseido, and Sephora, pledged to "eliminate unacceptable working conditions

and eradicate child labor” by 2023 (Pfeil and Sharma). That pledge has been pushed back to 2030. During the 2021 State of the Union Address, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen announced the intention to introduce a ban on the import of products produced by forced labor. Again, intention has about as much power as a wish upon a star. What it really comes down to is that there seems to be a more important motivation to look the other way at the illegal activities surrounding mica mining than to fix the issue. There appears to be a lot more talk about eradicating the unethical practices of child labor than action. No NGO or governmental agency has actually created a policy to expedite any change, but they sincerely promise to do so with their hands behind their backs! It is interesting to note that the companies and organizations that attend Summits like this loudly virtue-signal about the atrocities of child labor exploitation, but cannot equally loudly proclaim their specific contribution to combating it. In particular, it is disheartening to read that they would support the creation and improvement of child-friendly villages, but not specifically commit to a monetary or in-kind contribution.

Make-up companies, such as Estée Lauder, L’Oréal, and Yves Rocher, are helping to create “child-friendly” villages (Bengtsen and Paddison). To many, education is an important tool in preventing illegal child labor, and these villages assist children in going to school instead of mining for mica.. These companies work with local communities and governments to build more education centers and improve living conditions in existing education facilities by creating access to clean water, providing more meals, and providing more toilets. A “child-friendly” village is a model for the local communities and state governments to improve conditions in more areas. “BBA told the Guardian that of the five hundred villages, one hundred have so far been converted to child friendly villages leading to three thousand six hundred fifty children being enrolled in school, several new schools constructed and existing schools improved with

basic infrastructure such as clean drinking water, mid-day meals and toilets” (Bengtson and Paddison). Are “child-friendly” villages the solution to reduce, if not eliminate, illegal child labor practices in mica mining, permanently? The difficult reality is that an atrocity like child labor exists because individuals, groups, communities, industries, NGOs, and governments, whether working separately or together, support them. Although there may be different reasons why different entities allow illegal child labor to exist, the result is the same—that a marginalized group is exploited. “Social development initiatives such as the child friendly villages can only have a positive impact if they are complementary to government efforts, on national and local level,” says Aysel Sabahoglu, child rights officer of Terre des Hommes” (Bengtson and Paddison).

It is achingly evident that as one climbs higher up in the food chain of greed, there is an indirect relationship between humanity and profit. That is, as profits soar, humanity disappears. In addition, it has become clear that industries, NGOs and government agencies are no longer mutually exclusive entities. There are deeper ties than meets the eye and the tie that binds them is greed. It is disheartening and tragic to realize that the value of a commodity can outweigh the value of innocent lives. The real dilemma is to figure out how to make illegal mines less profitable to all of the entities involved in the chain. Senior Project Manager at Terre des Hommes Netherlands, Claire van Bekkum states that “Reaping less profits on the wholesale end and paying more for the mineral on the consumer end, may be a significant part of the solution” (Bengtson and Paddison). Another Terre des Hommes representative, “McQuaide says the answer to child labour in mica mining will not be found in company boycotts, audits or social projects, however well meaning, but instead in efforts that push recalcitrant governments to act” (Bengtson and Paddison). A step further is to empower exporting communities and local

governments to act because they have the most direct and manageable access to create and oversee policies that eliminate exploitative structures in their own marginalized communities. They would have the most ability to impose monetary sanctions on companies that overlook illegal mining practices. Education is another effective way to keep children away from mica mining. Investing in the education of a community's children gives them a future beyond menial and exploitative jobs. In addition, education is the key to transparency. These marginalized communities will be armed with information about business practices, government practices, and the economy. Moreover, the reality of business is that morality and ethics are tools. If morality and ethics get in the way of profitability, then they are dispensed. If morality and ethics can be used as marketing tools to increase profitability, then they are exploited. By educating exporting communities on the psychological underpinnings of business and government by way of propaganda, transparency will lead to more effective and longer-term solutions. Finally, importing and exporting governments at the federal levels, particularly the United States, must put mica on the List of Goods Produced by Child Labor or Forced Labor! Regulators, lobbyists, and governmental representatives cannot continue to profit by overlooking these illegal mining practices because they become accountable.

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