



## Forced Labor: The Hidden Cost of China's Belt and Road Initiative

Since 2013, the Peoples Republic of China (PRC) has been implementing the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)—a trillion-dollar infrastructure development and economic integration strategy connecting at least 144 countries around the world with raw materials, technological and financial resources, and labor for large-scale projects in construction, mining, and manufacturing, among other sectors. Most BRI projects employ PRC nationals and are managed by PRC-owned enterprises. The program has enabled the PRC to find a home for its own excess manufacturing capacity and surplus laborers, while ensuring its continued access to invaluable raw material inputs, edging out other world powers from international development partnerships and economic cooperation, securing intelligence, and amassing political, military, and economic leverage over participating countries through the accrual and manipulation of debt.

Between the macroeconomic ripples of this system is a tragic human cost: forced labor. PRC and host country nationals employed in some BRI construction projects, mining operations, and factories in African, European, Middle Eastern, Asian, Pacific, Latin American, and Caribbean countries experience deceptive recruitment into debt bondage, arbitrary wage garnishing or withholding, contract irregularities, confiscation of travel and identity documentation, forced overtime, and resignation penalties, as well as intimidation and threats, physical violence, denial of access to urgent medical care, poor working and living conditions, restricted freedom of movement and communication, and retaliation for reported abuses. Those who escape often find themselves at the mercy of local immigration authorities, who are not always trained to receive or care for trafficking victims.

Last year, a man from a rural community in the PRC hoping to raise money for his family responded to a recruitment ad for a high-paying steel production job in Indonesia. When he arrived, his employers took his passport, told him he would be paid significantly less than he was promised, and forced him to work hours far beyond the schedule to which he had agreed. Within months, he was sneaking away from his workstation to post surreptitious pictures of himself online with handwritten notes begging for someone to help him get home. His family contacted the local PRC consular services to try and pressure the factory to return his passport, but to no avail. He and four other laborers eventually managed to pool their money to hire a PRC national broker to help them leave the country, but the broker just took their money and brought them to yet another PRC-affiliated industrial park in Indonesia where they toiled for months under similarly abusive conditions. They continued saving money until they could pay a smuggler to take them to Malaysia, but when they reached their destination, the smuggler dumped them in the water off the coast. They had to swim to shore, where they were shot at, arrested, and detained by the local authorities.

Stories like this are not uncommon in dozens of BRI countries. The PRC has not created a central governing body for the BRI, nor has it made public a full list of BRI-affiliated projects. Historically, PRC authorities have not exercised sufficient oversight of recruitment channels, contracts, or labor conditions to prevent abuses, and PRC diplomatic services have routinely failed to identify or assist those exploited within the program. Many of these vulnerabilities intensified during the COVID-19 pandemic, when local travel restrictions, slowed hiring practices, and reentry bans imposed by the PRC government prevented workers from leaving and reporting abusive conditions. For example, at one BRI project in Papua New Guinea, nearly half of PRC workers reported being unable to return home in 2021 due to the pandemic.



All countries should be able to pursue development opportunities without sacrificing their respect for human rights. Countries interested in or currently hosting BRI projects must ensure their citizens, PRC nationals, and other migrant workers are protected from human trafficking. If a BRI project employs local workers, the host government must scrutinize recruitment channels and contracts to ensure its citizens are not lured under false pretenses and exploited. Governments must enhance their physical inspection of BRI worksites to monitor working conditions and screen for forced labor indicators—especially document withholding; these inspections must be frequent and unannounced, to avoid giving project leadership time to conceal their abuses, and they must involve victim-centered interview methods that prevent retaliation against workers. Countries must also ensure PRC nationals and other migrant workers feel comfortable coming forward to report their abuses, rather than made to fear deportation due to visa irregularities. This can be achieved through outreach and awareness raising in key BRI project areas and training for immigration authorities. If forced labor is detected, countries must be prepared to receive and protect victims—be it through shelter services, medical care, or consular assistance in the case of PRC nationals and other migrant workers who wish to return home – and to initiate and support relevant criminal investigations and/or civil remediation.

Participating countries must also be aware that vigilance is crucial not only at BRI worksites but also in their surrounding communities as well. Sex trafficking, child forced labor in hazardous work, and exploitative marriages featuring elements of sex trafficking and forced labor have reportedly increased in some areas where BRI construction projects are underway. The displacement of local communities to make room for BRI projects—often carried out with little or no timely compensation for those who lose their homes —compounds many of these vulnerabilities.

Without greater attention to these details, countries may not be able to safely or ethically benefit from BRI-affiliated projects, and the implications go beyond infrastructure. The international community is paying increasingly close attention to, and making policy and investment decisions based on, the eradication of forced labor from global supply chains.

But countries do not have to face these challenges alone; to best protect against the human rights and reputational implications of forced labor in BRI projects, governments should be ready to foster and partner with a robust civil society that includes shelter organizations, direct service providers, watchdog groups, survivors, and nongovernmental organizations conducting awareness raising.



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