

Exclusive

ArcelorMittal's green goal seems remote in a Bosnian city

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Luxembourg steel giant slammed for unhealthy conditions as Red Lions game kicks off



Mesud, who did not give his last name, looks out on the ArcelorMittal factory outside Zenica, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and the adjoining dump where he collects scrap steel on 4 May © Photo credit: Jeanne Frank

Ingrid Gercama and Harun Dinarević

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When Luxembourg's national football team takes the pitch for their Euro 2024 qualifying match on Tuesday in Bosnia and Herzegovina, they will be inhaling some of the world's most polluted air about three kilometres from the ArcelorMittal factory that gets most of the blame. Air pollution in Zenica, a Bosnian city of about 120,000, last year ranked in the worst 2% of more than 7,300 cities around the world for fine particulate matter, according to Swiss air quality technology company IQAir. The tiny granules of soot that travel deep into the lungs and enter the bloodstream can come from burning fossil fuels, for example during the steel-making process.

"It is awful and dirty here", says DijanBajramović, 64, who lives with her husband Beudin next to the Luxembourg steel giant's complex outside of Zenica. Every day, she cleans a thick layer of red-brown dust from her home's windows as thick plumes of smoke billow from the ArcelorMittal factory's exhaust towers, she said.



A cemetery overlooks the ArcelorMittal steel plant outside of Zenica, Bosnia and Herzegovina © Photo credit: Shutterstock

As ArcelorMittal develops a €200 million plant in Belgium that captures and reuses polluting gases and pursues carbon neutrality, that kind of progress seems remote in Zenica.

It's been nearly two decades since ArcelorMittal boss Lakshmi Mittal bought the plant while it was still recovering after Yugoslavia dissolved in war during the early 1990s. Now, the common complaint in Zenica is that ArcelorMittal has done too little for too long to protect them from the disease and premature death that comes from dirty air.

Dirty history

The steel works have long been polluting Zenica's air and soil, according to government researchers. Iron and steel production has dominated the local economy for more than 130 years and reached a peak during former Yugoslavia's socialist focus on heavy industry, when tens of thousands worked at the Zenica complex.

Government authorities also have failed the community due to the economic clout of a business which generates more revenue than all but a handful of the country's companies, critics say.

"The government has had the same story for years: we know that the company is polluting, but we must maintain employment," said Samir Lemeš, 55, a University of Zenica professor and leading member of citizens' group Eko Forum Zenica. "They [ArcelorMittal] are powerful, rich, and do what they want."

Salaries for the company's 2,500 workers, along with contributions to local causes, amount to about €31 million a year, plus another €128 million to 600 local suppliers, ArcelorMittal said. The average salary in Bosnia and Herzegovina is about €630 a month, according to the country's statistics agency.



A building in central Zenica shown on 4 May is painted with the demand "We want filters," a response to complaints of dirty air many blame on Luxembourg-based steelmaker ArcelorMittal © Photo credit: Jeanne Frank

But the air around Zenica is “dangerously affected by high concentrations of sulphur dioxide and particulate matter that can seriously harm public health,” according to the Federal Meteorological Institute.

Bosnia had the highest proportion in Europe of the population whose deaths were linked to air pollution in 2019, according to the World Health Organization. Other estimates by Oxford University’s Our World In Data project put Bosnia second-worst after North Macedonia. The rate is nine times greater than in Luxembourg, researchers found. Air pollution was at least a risk factor in about 12% of deaths in Bosnia that year, Oxford researchers found.

“Ten people in my family died of lung tumors. They all lived here. Only two aunts who do not live in the city are still alive,” said Beudin Bajramović, 63.

The factory’s nearest neighbours were warned in 2010 against eating their garden vegetables because it and the soil were tainted by heavy metals.

The steel factory also emits the cancer-causing chemical benzene from an area called its coke oven. On average, the emissions are 18 times higher than legally permitted, according to the University of Zenica. In March 2022, it was 45 times the legal maximum. No amount of benzene emissions is considered safe, according to the World Health Organization. The company’s latest environmental permit to operate in Bosnia — which ArcelorMittal received last year — requires the company to cut benzene output in two years. ArcelorMittal has faced several fines for failing to meet deadlines in its earlier permits.



Edita Šišić looks into the greenhouse next to her home in Tetovo that was built after government officials warned against eating vegetables and fruit that grow unprotected in polluted soil © Photo credit: Jeanne Frank

ArcelorMittal did not detail the improvements it plans for the coke oven. Bosnian law requires that companies use the best techniques available in the EU for controlling pollutants, without specifying what those are.

The area's woes can't all be blamed on ArcelorMittal.

Zenica and its suburb Tetovo, where the company's plant is located, is at the bottom of a steep valley that traps the air. Cigarette smoking is widespread, and the area's poverty means many families burn cheap and dirty coal, old tyres or waste for indoor heating, ArcelorMittal said in response to questions from the *Luxembourg Times*.

Data lacking

Solid statistics on the factory's health impact on the people of Zenica are lacking. No detailed studies have been conducted on the correlation between air quality and diseases like cancer. ArcelorMittal hasn't measured how much benzene is released by the factory's coke oven, the company said.

"We are aware that air quality is an issue in Zenica and that air pollution and public health are matters of public interest," a company spokesperson wrote in an email. "However, it is wrong to suggest that ArcelorMittal Zenica's emissions are solely or primarily responsible for illnesses in Zenica. There are no studies or evidence supporting this allegation."



Children attending the Hasan Kikić primary school in Tetovo laugh as they gathered on 4 May outside the school bordering the ArcelorMittal steel factory © Photo credit: Jeanne Frank

Lacking scientific data, Edita Šišić and a friend, a former nurse, are keeping a list of neighbours with serious diseases, mainly cancer and diabetes. Šišić lives near the factory and cares for her 16-year-old son with diabetes and her husband, who suffers from asthma. She believes their health is worsened by the smoke-belching factory. She's also built a greenhouse to keep the strawberries and vegetables she grows inside from being contaminated.

Lemeš' Eco Forum wants to launch a study of the effects benzene emissions have on pre-teen children in Tetovo. The proposal is waiting for permission from government health institutions.

Fetić Rašid has worked at the ArcelorMittal plant for more than 15 years. Until he was elected as president of the ArcelorMittal Zenica Workers' Union in March, the 39-year-old worked at the coke oven.

“There are terrible fumes, stench, gases, dust, and heat,” said Rašid. “There are some filters. I can't say there are none. But it's not adequate protection.”

Around one in ten of the ArcelorMittal workforce is on sick leave, most commonly from heart attacks, strokes and cancer, Rašid said. The company said 3% of workers are on sick leave, though that tends to increase at this time of year when staff claim illness to collect 80% of their salary and do agricultural work in their fields.

Workers in Rašid's area of the plant are required to wear protective clothing and face masks with breathing filters, the company said. They also get medical check-ups every 12-18 months, ArcelorMittal said.

Slow improvement

ArcelorMittal will spend €36 million to address benzene emissions by 2027 on top of more than €65 million in other environmental measures in the last five years, the company said.

Last year, the company completed a plant that takes waste gases from steelmaking and produces electricity and heat for Zenica. It replaced the city's old coal-fired facility and eliminated 150,000 tons of coal a year, reducing sulphur dioxide emissions by 80% and 18% of ArcelorMittal's total CO₂ emissions, the company said.

Some have turned to street protests and the courts to force ArcelorMittal to speed up its efforts.

In 2015, Eko Forum asked prosecutors to investigate ArcelorMittal for environmental crimes, which in 2021 they finally refused to do. The company had “made efforts to improve the situation and find the best solution, having in mind that it is a complex problem, so it cannot be concluded that it is a deliberate act,” prosecutors in the capital Sarajevo said.



Beudin Bajramović and his wife Dijan live at the edge of ArcelorMittal’s steel works in Tetovo, outside of Zenica. The Luxembourg-based company deposits heaps of slag, a by-product of steel production, at their shared property line. © Photo credit: Jeanne Frank In 2016, Enver Hasanbašić, 80, and his wife Rahima alleged ArcelorMittal damaged their health and hurt the value of the home they bought near the factory in 2005, when the factory stood silent after the war. The court in Zenica ruled last year that ArcelorMittal hadn’t complied with its duty to cut its pollution.

“The measures to reduce air emissions and noise emissions prescribed by environmental permits were not fully complied with,” the judge wrote. But because Hasanbašić’s lawyers could not specify the exact quantities of pollutants released, he was ordered to pay the steel giant around €10,000 in legal fees.

Beudin Bajramović said he would like to see the world’s second-largest steel company leave his city. His wife Dijana disagrees.

“There are entire families who depend on the industry. But for God’s sake, let them work according to European standards so that we too can breathe clean air,” she said.

(Additional reporting by Emery P. Dalesio)