
Ecuador: Uprising in demand of a country free from large-scale mining

The Ecuadorian communities affected by mining convened a Mining Uprising to take place on 5 June, World Environmental Day. Different points of resistance were established covering the national geography in Imbabura, Quito, Chimborazo, Cañar, Azuay, El Oro, Zamora and Morona. Although the protest was peaceful, law enforcement agents repressed the communities protesting during the first days, particular in Tarqui, Victoria del Portete, Molleturo and San Carlos-Balao, causing the indignation of the population over the police's brutal and arbitrary treatment. Investigations and sanctions regarding their responsibility are being demanded.

At all events, the Uprising was a success as it mobilized thousands of people affected by the mega mining projects in the most conflictive locations of the country. This strengthened the decision of the communities and organizations established as a National Coordination Committee for the Defence of Life and Sovereignty, to continue struggling until they attain the objectives set out in their plan of action and to obtain the declaration of Ecuador as a "country free of large-scale mining." Furthermore, the efforts deployed by the communities served to place the mining problem on the national and international agenda.

One of the greatest concerns of the communities resisting mining activities in the country is the lack of political decision by the Government to respect and ensure respect for the Constitution and the collective interests of the Ecuadorian people vis-à-vis the terrible threat hanging over the lives of the affected communities, with the omnipresence of transnational mining companies and their imminent activities in some of the cases. On taking up a stand against mining, the communities are defending their rights, their water, their forests and a healthy environment for future generations. For their part, mining companies have relied on public law enforcement agents or on their own security bodies and on a maze of the so-called "community public relations officers" harassing and intimidating community leaders, creating a permanent state of insecurity and violence (see Bulletin No. 118).

In the Amazon province of Zamora, the Yantzaza canton is totally covered by mining concessions. This area with a rich and diverse flora and fauna, unique in the world, still has dense forests that have managed to survive the attacks of the depredatory rationale prevailing since the times of the conquest. Zamora Chinchipe is the cradle of originating peoples, generously hosting thousands of families from Lojas and other provinces, displaced by deforestation and the consequent droughts and other critical situations. The farming culture they have developed in the fertile river basins enables them to enjoy food self-sufficiency and provide healthy food to other parts of the country. This province's Network for the Defence of Nature, Dignity and Life states: "We want the State to establish policies that will help us to stay in our villages, living in the country we always dreamed of, an ecological and agricultural country and not a mining country."

On the western slopes of the Andes, the communities of the northeast area of Intag, in the province of Imbabura, also defend a cloud forest, the habitat of biodiversity unique in the world. Thanks to an alternative organizational process, innovative in the country, the communities from this area have developed diverse productive activities consolidating the process against mining, which means not only the displacement of families and communities to leave the way clear to mining, but also the

destruction of these valuable forests.

The National Coordination Committee also stated its “decision to put pressure on the Government to make it decide to act in favour of its people.” Mining activities have been experiencing difficulties over the past few days following the resignation of the Minister of Energy and Mines, Alberto Acosta. Mr. Acosta had appeared willing to support the communities and had been considered as a possible ally within the government in spite of the fact that he had never taken any steps to withdraw any of the mining concessions, one of the firm demands made by the affected communities. It is very probable that the pressure from the various interest groups was instrumental in the removal of Minister Acosta this week. He will be running as candidate for the Constitutional Assembly.

With or without an allied Minister, the anti-mining struggle continues, convening all sectors of society to take an active part in the Uprising that aims to continue at the end of June, to halt the invasion of foreign transnational companies intending to plunder minerals from the ground, leaving poverty, unemployment, environmental and social pollution behind them. The National Coordinating Committee is urging the government to “listen to the clamour of thousands of families that are defending their lives and their national dignity and to act urgently, annulling the concessions, immediately suspending the activities of transnational mining companies throughout the country and requiring them to abandon our communities.”

In anticipation of the Constitutional Assembly, other measures proposed by the resisting communities include, among others, declaring the whole Amazon region and the springs and banks of rivers as intangible ecological reserves, to remain untouched by private commercial extracting and exploitation interests. That ground and surface water cannot be subject to any type of privatization.

Nationalization of natural resources and their use according to ecological, social, cultural and ancestral characteristics of the peoples and communities. Immediate compensation for the psychological and social damage caused to the communities by mining activities. A regulatory framework to improve artisan mining practices, guarantees for farmers regarding their possession of the surface and subsoil, guaranteeing their activities over mining extraction, ensuring that the communities will not be displaced.

By Guadalupe Rodriguez, e-mail: guadalupe@regenwald.org