
Colombia: Popular revolt against gold mining

The price of gold is rising for the tenth consecutive year. As a result, more and more investors, financial market operators and central banks are turning to gold as a safe haven in the face of global economic instability. This has troubling consequences, because gold mining is one of the most destructive and polluting of all mining activities.

Mining companies have set their sights on Latin America, and a genuine gold rush has broken out in Colombia. In response, popular opposition to mining activity, in defence of life, water resources, the environment and local cultures, is growing stronger by the day.

Colombian President Juan Manuel Santos insists on the importance of promoting large-scale open-pit mining for the country's development. The exploitation of the country's non-renewable natural resources is viewed as the "engine" of its economy. In fact, the Colombian Ministry of Mines maintains that there is mining potential in every region of the country, and has granted some 10,000 mining titles representing a total area of 43,000 square kilometres, of which 4,000 are already under exploitation.

However, the current Mining Code, amended in 2009, is not particularly respectful when it comes to land use (mining projects can be declared to be for the "public benefit", denying local authorities the right to oppose mining activities in their jurisdictions), ethnic groups (there are seven indigenous reserves in which mining rights have been granted that cover their entire territory), or the environment (Colombia suffers from the highest level of mercury contamination in the world). According to the Colombian Association of Miners (ASOMINEROS), the country's total gold production in 2008 was 34,300 kilograms.

Gold mining in the Andes

AngloGold Ashanti (AGA) is the biggest mining company operating in Colombia. Its gold exploration activities in the La Colosa mine in Cajamarca, in the central-western department of Tolima, poses a threat to one of the country's most important hydrologic systems, which supplies water to more than four million people. The project is located on the last surviving fragments of the páramo and high Andean forest ecosystems. These regulate the water supply for the municipality of Coello, which would be contaminated with cyanide.

The territory affected is rich in biodiversity and considered the "food basket" of Colombia, which is now endangered by mining activity. Water shortages have already led to a decline in rice production. The integrity and fertility of the area's soil will be affected in the short term.

AGA violated Colombian legislation (Law 2 of 1959) by carrying out mining exploration in a forest reserve area without authorization. According to the reports of people affected, the company obtained information on potential gold reserves in the region through fraudulent means.

Unfortunately, AGA's actions have already created deep rifts within the community itself and the

institutions of the river basin, as well as divisions between communities in the upper basin and communities in the lower basin who are water users. The social conflict created by this polarization has led to the shunning and stigmatization of organizations and individuals who attempt to demonstrate the negative impacts of large-scale mining operations in this part of the Andes.

AGA's abuse of its economic power is reflected in various aspects of daily life in the department. What AGA calls "pre-investment" is nothing other than coercion through the use of economic clout. This is the only possible explanation for the large numbers of staff hired (with salaries higher than the regional average) before mining operations have even begun. Added to this is the economic and technical support given to social organizations, money invested in the infrastructural upgrading of roads that will potentially connect to the mining operations, donations to community councils, Cajamarca city hall and the local hospital, sponsorship of the Tolima football team, proposals of support for the University of Tolima, the purchase of land at prices far above market value, and now proposals to finance environmental organizations like the Environmental Action Fund, among various other initiatives.

AGA's immense economic power has allowed it to buy up land in strategic areas, particularly in terms of potential water supply. It has also been able to formalize requests for mining titles throughout the region and in much of the rest of the country, fully aware of the fact that local peasant communities do not have the same capacity to request water concessions.

The company's actions in the region have nothing to do with fostering development, or generating employment, or supporting education, or sports, or local government capacity, or improving roads, or promoting transportation cooperatives.

Social movements in the area are working to develop mechanisms to ensure that gold mining operations never happen in this region of the country, much less large-scale operations. They warn that "this could open the door to the modification of the country's environmental assets as a whole, and society will have no participation in this whatsoever."

Gold rush in the Pacific coast tropical rainforests

Another gold mining hotspot lies in the heart of the tropical rainforest along Colombia's Pacific coast, namely in the municipality of Buenaventura, in the department of Cauca. This area forms part of the Chocó biogeographical region, and is covered with dense rainforest and criss-crossed by major rivers like the Dagua, a source of life fed by many others like the San Cipriano River, for which a tropical rainforest reserve is named.

Zaragoza is a settlement made up of Afro-Colombian communities. Mining activity has provided it with a few meagre benefits in exchange for drastic deterioration of the environment and has turned the river into a chemical waste dump.

Following the discovery of gold reserves, since 2009 entrepreneurs have descended from all corners of the country, including Medellín, Cali and Bogotá, to indiscriminately extract the precious metal. The population has skyrocketed from around 100 families to over 10,000 fortune hunters.

Gold extraction activities currently stretch between kilometres 23 and 38 of the Buenaventura-Cali highway, affecting numerous towns that have been turned into "lawless cities". "This mining activity is spreading like a cancer to other rivers on the Pacific coast," declare activists in Buenaventura.

The environmental destruction is blatantly evident. Aerial photographs depict scenes of total devastation. The poor conditions and illegality of mining operations create the risk of avalanches, landslides and accidents, combined with the danger of the river flooding. The use of more than 250 backhoes has damaged flora and fauna as well as subsistence crops.

The water is no longer fit for domestic consumption, and there have been outbreaks of malaria and dengue. The alterations suffered by the river make it impossible to distinguish its natural flow, and its banks are filled with the plastic and cardboard used to set up makeshift tents as well as restaurants, stores and bars. A scientific study whose results were published in the local press in November 2010 revealed that mercury levels where the Dagua River flows into the Pacific Ocean are three times higher than the recommended limit. The local population's recreation areas have also been destroyed. The gold rush has brought local communities nothing but wreckage and poverty, the destruction of their crops and homes, and the drastic pollution of their river.

Local traditions and daily life in the area have been seriously impacted. Violence and armed conflict have intensified, leading to forced displacement and destabilizing community life. The control of the area and of mining activity by paramilitary troops is more than evident. Families can no longer move freely in the area. The work of local Community Councils has been obstructed. There have been scores of human rights violations, including over 100 deaths and murders. A local woman who complained to the owner of a backhoe for endangering her house was shot in the back, in front of the whole community.

This April, a number of local organizations in the municipality of Buenaventura joined together to launch the Declaration of Buenaventura (<http://www.pacificocolombia.org/novedades/declaracion-de-buenaventura-colombia/18>), in which they called for unity among Afro-Colombian and indigenous organizations, the defence of the local environment as a contribution to the defence of the planet, and the declaration of a state of social emergency in the Pacific coast region.

Town of Marmato sentenced to death by gold

The town of Marmato is literally doomed to disappear. This is what will happen if the Canadian company Medoro Resources succeeds in its plans for an open-pit gold mine here. The company has not clearly explained its proposed project to the community, which has led to considerable uncertainty. What is very clear, however, is that the gold reserves will run out in 20 to 35 years.

Located in the department of Caldas in the country's western mountain range, Marmato is one of the municipalities with the highest poverty levels in Colombia. The local inhabitants feel that they are being plundered, and have repeatedly denounced to official institutions and the public that the Colombian government has given its backing and active support to the plans for a large-scale mining operation. Under current Colombian legislation, it would be permissible to carry out small and medium-sized mining activities in the area, as has been the case until now, but large-scale operations would not be allowed. Nevertheless, Medoro plans to convert 143 mining concessions in the area into one big open-pit mine operation. Exploration work would be carried out over the course of two to three years and, according to different sources, would involve the drilling of up to 200,000 perforations.

For its part, the departmental government of Caldas has issued warnings of the possibility of rockslides on the mountain and suggested that the people of Marmato move away from the town. Yamil Amar, president of the Civic Board in Defence of Marmato, explained that "as a way of getting

the community out of the way they have made up the story that we are all in danger, and it isn't true." It is an open secret that an open-pit mining operation would force the inhabitants of the town to move to the district of El Llano, where many who believed in the risk of rockslides have already resettled.

It is highly doubtful that the small-scale mining which serves as a means of livelihood for many families here would survive the arrival of open-pit mining. Even the guacheros, the local name for illegal miners who search for gold in the mountain, are becoming worried, because they know they will not be given priority for the jobs promised by Medoro. These concerns continue to grow alongside the general uncertainty looming over the area. The guacheros began their informal mining activities when the last company operating in Marmato, Goldfields, went bankrupt in late 2008 and they were left without jobs.

The inhabitants of Marmato and indigenous communities in Caldas, who are opposed to the town's destruction, argue that "our town is not just mines and its inhabitants are not just those who control the mines and other sources of work. The town of Marmato is us, the people who have lived in it and feel an attachment to it that cannot be measured in monetary terms. It is the scenery we look upon, the cobbled streets we walk along, the unique architecture that characterizes our town, the neighbours with whom we have built ties of solidarity, the stories that our elders tell the young about a long-ago past where the histories of indigenous, Afro-descendent and white peoples are intertwined, the artisanal miners who have always known how to extract gold from the mountain, the mule drivers who make it possible to transport goods along our steep roads, the peasant farmers and indigenous communities who live around us and supply us with their agricultural crops."

Despite the challenges they have faced, more than 50 Colombian social and environmental organizations have joined together to create the Colombian Network Against Large-Scale Transnational Mining (RECLAME), founded in February 2010 to oppose large-scale mining operations and raise awareness of mining conflicts in Colombia. Their resistance struggle has already yielded a number of victories, such as the success of the mobilization against a gold mining project in the Santurbán páramo in the department of Santander planned by the Canadian multinational Greystar, which decided to withdraw its request for an environmental permit.

In this struggle, backed by the force of arguments and waged in the streets of Santander, thousands of Colombians joined together to make Santurbán a symbolic example of resistance to large-scale transnational mining.

Extracted and adapted from the report "El oro de Colombia: rebelión social contra explotaciones mineras sin control", June 2011, by Guadalupe Rodríguez, Rainforest Rescue, email: guadalupe@regenwald.org, based on information disseminated through RECLAME and Rainforest Rescue research studies. The full version of the report, submitted by the author, is available at http://wrm.org.uy/deforestacion/mineria/El_oro_de_Colombia.pdf; see also the article "Triunfó la movilización contra el proyecto minero en Santurbán", Red Colombiana Frente a la Gran Minería

Transnacional, <http://reclamecolombia.org/index.php/noticias/17-santander/202-triunfo-la-movilizacion-contra-el-proyecto-minero-en-santurban>

