
Ecuador: Consolidation of resistance against mining in Intag

After 12 years, powerful multinational mining companies have been unable to bend peasant resolve in the zone of Intag, Canton Cotacachi, Imbabura Province in the northwest of Ecuador.

This nightmare began in 1991, when an anonymous Japanese man started to travel around the area in his vehicle. Nobody knew exactly what he was doing. Towards 1995, it became known that he was “prospecting for mines” that is to say, he was looking for minerals in the subsoil.

With this exploration, what had been picturesque about this Japanese man became a harmful nuisance. Because of the drilling and the contaminating substances poured into the watercourses, the locals started to feel noxious effects on the health of children who bathed in the rivers, the cattle started getting sick and other mishaps took place. The local population started to organize itself, mainly promoted by the need to obtain information on what was happening behind their backs. This was during the times of Bishi Metals, a Japanese multinational company that remained in the memory of the peasants as child’s play compared to what was to come later.

It was in this context that Defensa y Conservación Ecológica de Intag – (Ecological Defence and Conservation of Intag - DECOIN) was born, a grass-roots organization coordinating educational and environmental protection programmes including a programme to protect water basins and the establishment of the Junin Community Reserve in addition to many other environmental and social initiatives.

Since the entry of the multinational mining companies the inhabitants of the communities of Cerro Pelado, Junín, El Triunfo, Villaflores, Cuaraví, La Armenia, Cazarpamba and Barcelona – those most affected by the mining project – have been ratifying their decision to prevent the companies’ activities on their land. So far, the mining companies have been unable to start mining activities proper, as the concessions are located within the Junin Community Reserve, an area of primary forest of enormous biological value located in the buffer zone of the Cotacachi-Cayapas Ecological Reserve, one of the most important reserves in Ecuador. Furthermore, these cloud forests are part of the Choco bioregion and are the Tropical Andes hotspot, the most candescent hotspot of the world’s 34 most important hotspots. This reserve is protected with great zeal by the communities.

The history of resistance against mining in Intag cannot be conceived without other organizational pillars, in addition to a series of positive events. One of these was the election in 1996 of the economist, Auki Tituaña, a charismatic indigenous leader, as Mayor of Cotacachi. The Mayor promoted a really participative political process, which among other things, enabled the promulgation, by initiative of the inhabitants of Intag, of a Municipal Ordinance which declared Cotacachi an Ecological Canton (the text is available at: accionecologica.org/descargas/areas/otros/documentos/ordenanza.doc). This is a unique regulation in Latin America and perhaps in the world, aimed at protecting natural resources and in this way placing an obstacle to mining.

Many situations arose, but what finally ended Bishi Metals’ days in Intag was the seizure of its camp by the community inhabitants who were going to be affected by the mining project: guards were

evicted, the company's belongings were removed and handed over to the Mayor in custody, the mining camp was lifted and what was left over was burnt. This led to a court case against some of those participating in the action, who were denounced, not by the company which more or less reluctantly seemed to accept the peoples' will, but by the Ecuadorian State, that is to say the Ministry of Energy and Mines. As they were never able to demonstrate guilt on the part of the peasants over these actions, following a lengthy legal process the case was dismissed in 1999.

At this point it should be noted that in Ecuador, the Mining Law presently in force was funded by the World Bank through a Project for Mining Development and Environmental Control (PRODEMINCA). During the execution of this project, a series of irregularities were committed vis-à-vis the World Bank's environmental standards, denounced at the time by DECOIN. The result of this complaint was an investigation into the project by the same Bank.

The areas of the mining concession in Intag were known as: Golden 1, Golden 2 and Magdalena 1. These consist of 7,000 hectares of mining concessions which, following the departure of Bishi Metals, were acquired by the Canadian mining company Ascendant. Presently Ascendant has a total of 22,500 hectares in the Intag area.

According to the testimonials of the local inhabitants, with the appearance of this mining company in the Intag area the worst nightmare that had ever occurred in the region began. The worst consequence is the social conflict triggered by the offers made by community relations officers – intermediaries between the company and the communities by means of fictitious development organizations (first the Garcia Moreno Development Council - Consejo de Desarrollo de García Moreno - CODEGAM, followed by the Organization for Intag Development - Organización de Desarrollo de Intag- ODI) – leading to confrontations between relatives, friends and neighbours.

Mayor Tituaña addressed the company in an open letter (15 December 2004), giving details of their lack of compliance with the laws: "Since the initiation of the presence of Ascendant Exploration in our Canton, [...] its officials have never informed us about their plans, nor have they requested the corresponding authorization to carry out their activities in our territory. Furthermore, the serious lack of consultation regarding your company's mining project with communities that may potentially be affected is an inescapable violation of Ecuadorian constitutional rights, a violation that we will never let go unpunished [...] the will of the communities has not been respected nor have the local development plans been prepared in a participative way among the canton's social actors. Furthermore, threats [...] that they will be killed have been received by our leaders fighting against mining". One of the aspects that is strongly questioned is the validity of these mining concessions.

Complaints made by the inhabitants to Human Rights organizations include: the offer of money to the presidents of the communities in exchange for their signature in favour of mining; the presence of bodyguards and para-military troops strongly armed with pistols, tear-gas and bombs, who on various occasions have shot in the air above the community members; payments to attend meetings convened by the mining company; pressure on the participants to sign blank sheets of paper; hiring of non-authorized outsourcing companies and; repeated invasion of private property.

The mining concession is located in an area inhabited by the settlers of five communities (some 150 families), that should be evicted by the project. Traditionally it has been hard for the communities to obtain title deeds for their possessions. They have difficulty in obtaining the documentation to be submitted and in justifying their rights over the land. A short while after the arrival of the mining companies, well-known land traffickers (people who professionally devote themselves to allocating themselves possessions and showing, with false documentation, their rights over these properties)

have repeatedly attempted to take possession illegally and register lands located on or around the mining areas. They have managed to do so on some occasions in a matter of days thanks to the complicity of corrupt officials. They have also made illegal purchases within areas of the State Forestry Heritage or mining protection areas or even of lands that had already been sold to other people at a lower price. All these confusions have led the Anticorruption Commission (CCCC) to make an exhaustive survey that should finalize very shortly.

Since September 2006, the local communities have condemned the repeated and systematic attempts made by the mining companies to discredit and slander people and organizations that have taken up a position against mining. According to the Ecumenical Commission on Human Rights (CEDHU), one of the most aggressive ways in which these attempts have been made is through a campaign of systematic complaints against various leaders and peasants who have intervened following each attempt at entry to the mining concessions by the company staff or their followers.

Due to the sequence of events described above, resistance to mining in the zone has increased and today has the unanimous opposition of all the local governments in the region. Each one of the seven parochial governments in the Intag area and the Provincial government, in addition to the communities within the limits or adjacent to the mining concessions, have publicly expressed their opposition to the mining project.

In addition to resisting mining, the interesting organizational process that has taken place in the Intag area has provided an opportunity to improve organic coffee production, almost totally exported to Japan at an appropriate price, maintained in spite of market fluctuations. Other organized groups make handicrafts using sisal, hand embroidery, soaps made on the basis of Aloe Vera and other natural products. The Junin community, the centre of resistance, has a community tourism initiative, gathering most of the community families, and hosting an average of 650 tourists per year and generating significant benefits. Furthermore, a group of game-wardens has been set up who monitor environmental protection and the integrity of the primary forests, water and biodiversity.

Men, women, and young people have gathered in various organizations, each with definite aims. The process of resistance to mining has also led to a generation of proud women and men leaders, who are aware and prepared and who know their rights. The common position in the area is “No to Mining,” and this position is nonnegotiable. It is for the environment, water, life and future generations. It is for the cloud forest, the Rock Cock, the Spectacled Bear and thousands of other species.

On a political level, the process taking place in Ecuador is a door open to the definitive triumph of this process that has lasted for 12 long years. The dialogue is open. Much hope has been deposited in the Constitutional Assembly, although as Intag has explained “We cannot wait for the Constitutional Assembly, this is a daily struggle.” And neither are the economic interests dormant.

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