
Nicaragua: Canadian mining company accused of cyanide spill

The municipality of Bonanza belongs to the North Atlantic Autonomous Region. Since 1880, when gold deposits were discovered, the region has suffered from the "gold rush." It also gave rise to strong migratory currents from many parts of the world in the search for this metal. Presently, the main economic activities of the region continue to be the exploitation together with industrial and artisan processing of gold, and subsistence agriculture.

On 14 January 2003, a cyanide solution spill --a product used in the industrial processing to obtain gold-- took place at the Canadian company HEMCONIC and/or Greenstone. The spill was the equivalent of 30,433 gallons, with concentrations of over one hundred mg/litre. The accident was due to mechanical failures and was publicly denounced by the inhabitants of the locality. According to company technicians, the cyanide dumped into the Bambana river has a percentage of 0.9 ptm (parts to a million), which does not represent a hazard to human beings.

However, health workers from the Indigenous community of Prinzubila, Prinzapolka municipality, reported the death of seven children who are suspected of having been poisoned by drinking water from the Bambana River --this community is located on its banks. The death of another five children from the neighbouring community of Wasa King (Rosita municipality) was also reported.

A Ministry of Health Commission followed up on the cases and concluded that none of them was due to poisoning. However, the Humboldt Centre organization --that has monitored the activities of this mining company since its start-- set up a technical team in order to verify the magnitude of the spill. On 24 and 25 January, five samples were taken to verify the concentration of the solution, and later sent to the Centre for Research on Aquatic Resources (Centro de Investigaciones de Recursos Acuáticos – CIRA) for analysis. From the results obtained, it appears that, with the exception of sample 4, all the analyses showed results above the standard, indicating that the spill contained cyanide.

Since 1994, HEMCONIC has had the concession of the BONANZA plot, covering 12,400 hectares for a 50-year period. The main processing system used by the company is leaching. Already in 1995, the Bonanza mine discharged cyanide solutions into the rivers Tunky, Concha Urrutia and Bambana, causing damage to the environment and surrounding communities, basically rural or indigenous communities that obtain their water supply from surface sources, making them more directly exposed.

In 1999, the Humboldt Centre had formally denounced HEMCONIC before the Environmental Procurator's Office, for contamination of the water table and rivers surrounding the cyanided lagoon. The Nicaraguan Centre for Research on Aquatic Resources made an inspection and took samples from the mine's cyanided lagoon and concluded that the treatment process was inadequate to reduce the cyanide concentrations before they were discharged.

In the year 2000, the Humboldt Centre lodged a formal complaint against the Nicaraguan State and the Canadian mining company HEMCONIC and/or Greenstone, before the Honourable Water

Tribunal, for non-supervision on the part of the State in the task of monitoring and because of cyanide effluents into the Tunkey, Concha Urrutia and Bambina rivers, threatening the quality of life of the local inhabitants and affecting the water resources of the Bonanza municipality. The Tribunal's verdict was in favour of the plaintiff.

In this further episode of contamination, on 20 February, the Humboldt Centre submitted to the mass media the results of the analyses it had made. It also sent the Ministry of the Environment the results and a letter requesting their opinion in this respect and lodged a complaint with the Environmental Procurator's Office, requesting corrective action to be taken in this case. So far, no action is known to have been taken by the Environmental Procurator's Office. In the meanwhile, the local population continues to be submitted to the risk of cyanide poisoning.

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