
Colombia: Militarized mining tramples ancestral rights of indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities in the Chocó

The Chocó is a biogeographical region that forms part of the neotropics (meaning that it contains the largest area of tropical rainforest). Its high rainfall levels, tropical temperatures and isolation have helped make it one of the world's most biologically diverse regions as well. In Colombia it encompasses the Pacific Coast region and, among others, the department of Chocó, located between the jungles of Darién and the basins of the Atrato and San Juan Rivers.

For centuries, this region has been inhabited by Embera indigenous communities and the Afro-Colombian communities of the Jiguamiandó River basin, who are now threatened by a mining project. In 2005, the Colombian government granted U.S.-based Muriel Mining Corporation a 30-year concession for the mining of copper, gold, molybdenum and other minerals (the Mandé Norte mining project) in an area encompassing 11,000 hectares of indigenous and Afro-Colombian territory in the municipalities of Murindó (Antioquía) and Carmen del Darién (Chocó). This area has already been hit by the violence of numerous Colombian army operations backed by paramilitary groups, which resulted in repeated displacement of indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities.

In 2008, the Permanent Peoples' Tribunal tried and condemned Muriel Mining for "the violation of the self-determination, culture and cosmovision of indigenous, African-descendant and mestizo communities, and for the profits derived from the systematic execution of crimes committed over the last ten years by the military and paramilitary structures in the Bajo Atrato and Urabá regions to permit the exploitation and sale of copper reserves and gold and molybdenum by-products" (<http://www.sicsal.net/articulos/node/631>).

Since late 2004, Muriel Mining has been encroaching into the region with no prior consultation with local communities but with the consent of the Colombian state and government, a fact that has been systematically denounced by indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities.

In early January of this year, workers from the mining company entered Cerro Cara Perro, also known as Ellausakirandarra, a sacred site used for traditional spiritual practices by the area's ancestral peoples and local communities, who reported that the company had not duly consulted with the local population before entering their territory, in clear violation of the 1991 Colombian Constitution, ILO Convention 169 and Colombia's Law 70 of 1993.

The implementation of the mining project endangers the very survival of the local communities, because mining operations entail the contamination of the Jiguamiandó and Murindó Rivers, the destruction of native flora and fauna, and the prohibition of the use of natural resources by the region's ancestral inhabitants.

The area has been heavily militarized by Colombian army units, who have been sent in to control the region and protect the mining company's operations, overriding the rights of the area's traditional and legitimate inhabitants. The government justifies this move on the grounds of six meetings held with supposed indigenous representatives.

For their part, the communities of Alto Guayabal, Bachidubi, Bella Flor, Cañaveral, Caño Seco, Koredó, Coredocito, Guaguay, Isla, Lobo, Nueva Esperanza, Pueblo Nuevo, Puerto Lleras and Urada have taken action to stop the mining company, with the support of human rights organizations. The communities affected by the Mandé Norte project do not recognize the legitimacy of the meetings that the Colombian government puts forth as “consultation”, since they were held through the Department of Ethnic Affairs of the Ministry of the Interior and Justice. Only a few of the region’s communities participated in these meetings, which means they do not fulfil the principles of representativity or full and informed consent established in ILO Convention 169.

As a result, local indigenous leaders report that “with the power of Mother Earth and our spirits, since the middle of January more than 700 indigenous people have been carrying out a reconnaissance and territorial monitoring exercise in the community of Coredocito, the site where a camp is being built at a distance of three hours from the community.” (1)

On February 24 to 28, the communities will be holding a consultation for the defence of their territory, an internal decision-making process in which men, women, the elderly and young people over the age of 14 will be able to voice their opinions and decide whether or not to allow the mining company onto their land. The consultation will take place with the oversight of national and international social, human rights, environmental and civil society organizations, who will participate as observers and guarantors.

The National Indigenous Organization of Colombia (ONIC) declares: “We do not need gold to live, but we do need corn and plantains, so let’s drink chicha (corn liquor) and plant corn.

MULTINATIONALS OUT OF COLOMBIA! Muriel Mining Corporation out of indigenous and Afro-Colombian territory!”

To support the protest of the Embera indigenous people and other communities affected by Muriel Mining, Rainforest Rescue has organized a campaign that you can join through its Spanish language website at: <http://www.salvalaselva.org/protestaktion.php?id=346>

(1) “La Muriel Mining Coporation, atropella y desconoce las autoridades indígenas en la mina Cerro Carra de Perro”, statement by ONIC, in Noticias de Censat, Agua Viva, <http://www.censat.org/noticias/2009/2/6/La-Muriel-Mining-Coporation-atropella-y-desconoce-las-autoridades-indigenas-en-la-mina-Cerro-Carra-de-Perro/>