Ecuador: Major success against mining in the Intag zone

Intag, the subtropical anti-mining area in the northwest of Ecuador will not find 26 September 2007 an easy day to forget. After months of waiting for a resolution on the issue, the Ministry of Mines and Oil announced suspension of mining activities of Ascendant Copper, the Canadian mining company owner of the concessions in the area. The legal base for Minister Galo Chiriboga's decision is that the company breached the law when it launched its work, because it had not requested the corresponding authorization and reports from the Municipality of Cotacachi.

This decision affects 9,504 hectares and implies that the mining company cannot carry out mining, administrative or community relations activities. Unfortunately, the decision is not final but, according to Minister Chiriboga, it is to be maintained until the company renegotiates the contract and its presence in the area. Other concessions are also under government scrutiny.

These facts show that when grass-roots have a firm will and political circumstances go along with it, people can succeed in defending their sovereignty and interests. Similar decisions could be taken regarding other mining concessions in other parts of the country.

The feelings of Intag communities regarding the mining project and the presence of the company were initially pessimistic as, in the words of Councillor Luis Robalino from Intag "this is the fourth time that the same decision has been announced, but the company continues in the area." Now, following the arrival of government officials in the area to close the company offices, they are more optimistic.

During a press conference called at the beginning of October to show satisfaction over the government decision, some of the circumstances leading to the population's rejection of mining activity in the area and of the mining company were recalled. According to the Mayor of Cotacachi, the economist Auki Tituaña, together with the President of the Community Council, Polibio Pérez and other leaders from the area, right from the start of the company's activities, its purpose was to divide the communities to facilitate its entry in the area and its expected operations.

The presence of Ascendant Copper in the area over the past three years involved paramilitary forces shooting peasants, using trained dogs and tear gas. Furthermore, a hundred peasants or so were intimidated through the filing of complaints and legal processes that sought to silence resistance, but they were not successful. Many of them were firmly acquitted by judges from the Province of Imbabura. None were sentenced.

For his part, the Mayor denounced the company's links with "former military forces, hired murderers, drug traffickers and corrupt politicians." He also stated that "they thought that with the offer they once made of 60 or 70 million US dollars, they were going to obtain my support, but my price is much higher, it is the value of the mine" (according to the company manager AC, Francisco Veintimilla, a minimum of 110 billion dollars). "But sincerely, I prefer them to leave the trees, the fauna and flora untouched and for them to respect the development model that we have chosen for ourselves in Intag and Cotacachi."

He refers to the tropical cloud forest of immense biological value that is located precisely over the copper mine. Since the arrival of mining activities, “we have even managed to halt the traditional logging that our parents’ generation was implementing,” stated Polibio Pérez. “Nowadays we grant conservation much more value.”

Ascendant Copper has been in the area since 2004, although anti-mining resistance goes back to 1997. In this period many initiatives have been consolidated in the area, making Intag a model of alternative production: agriculture, tourism, crafts, cooperatives, organizations and other initiatives occupy hundreds of families in the area. Following the incidents caused by this and other mining companies in other locations in Ecuador, a Coordinating Office for the Defence of Life and Human Rights has been set up.

It is estimated that close on 95% of the inhabitants of Cotacachi, including the authorities, are against mining (see WRM Bulletin No. 118). “This is in defence of the interests of the State, the Province, the Canton and the area,” they say. Questioned about the possibility of a grass-roots consultation, they say they are open to it, but obviously this would have to be done in a clear and transparent way, organized by the Ecuadorian State and not by a transnational company.

For the time being, the company is departing, leaving behind it division and conflict among brothers and sisters, family members, neighbours and old friends. According to reports some community members “had a salary of US$ 300 to play volley-ball.” While the copper deposits remain in the area, the threat of mining is still latent.

Meanwhile, a Constitutional Assembly is being prepared in Ecuador to draw up the new Constitution. Alberto Acosta, who was Minister of Energy and Mines for a brief period during the current legislature, and who will most probably preside the Assembly, has on several occasions firmly stated his desire to make Ecuador a country free from large-scale mining.

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