
Nicaragua: Mining in the Southeast Biosphere Reserve

Nicaragua has been aware of the effects of mining for a long time now. The many gold mining and other metal mineral works have left an aftermath of environmental degradation, impacts on water resources with, inter alia, high cyanide, lead and arsenic levels and irreparable damage to the health of thousands of workers who have also suffered violation of their labour rights.

In spite of the fact that some Nicaraguan municipalities that had supported development on the basis of extractive activities now have the highest poverty rates – according to the poverty map prepared by the Nicaraguan Statistics and Census Institute (INEC) – the Government of Nicaragua is showing increasing interest in continuing to grant mining concessions all over the country. The Humboldt Centre has recorded that in December 2005, a total of 1,401,539 hectares were granted for metallic and non-metallic prospecting, in a country that has a total terrestrial area of 12,142,800 hectares.

Recently, the Municipal Government of Nueva Guinea, granted Minerales de Nicaragua S.A. (MINESA) a permit to prospect and exploit an open cast mine. Members of the Municipal Development Committee (CDM) of the Municipal Environmental Commission (CAM) and of Organized Civil Society (OCS) lodged a complaint with the Administrative Chamber of the Supreme Court of Justice (CSJ). In March 2004, MINESA had requested the General Natural Resources Office of the Ministry of Promotion, Industry and Trade (MIFIC) to grant it a mining concession for a 25 year period, of a 23,000 hectare parcel of land known as San Antonio.

The site is located in the Municipality of Nueva Guinea, part of the Southeast Nicaragua Biosphere Reserve, covering an extension of 18,340 Km² and harbouring high biodiversity of flora and fauna. “The soil of Nueva Guinea is clayey and acid. As it is in the humid tropics, leaf decay and organic elements together with humidity favour a productive fertile layer. However, the development of mining is detrimental to the environment, converting it into dry tropical lands,” explained Luis Umaña, OCS representative. Mining works will completely change the type of vegetation, biodiversity, flora and fauna, in addition to affecting soil productivity and causing displacement of the population and other economic activities which generate greater income.

Umaña explained that with this type of action the Municipal Government of Nueva Guinea will encourage the social and environmental degradation of the area, affecting over 120,000 inhabitants. As it is a region with constant rainfall, there is serious danger of scattered cyanide being absorbed by the soil and contaminating the groundwater.

The OCS complained that legal provisions had not been complied with regarding prior consultation with the local inhabitants in view of mining concessions. Law 475 on Citizen Participation requesting the government to consult with the citizenship has been violated. For this reason we are asking for more information in order to give an opinion regarding the viability, benefits or damages that this activity may give rise to in the Municipality of Nueva Guinea,” stated Umaña.

The OCS member urged the mayor of the Municipality and his government to respect articles 60 and 102 of Nicaragua’s Political Constitution, which guarantee citizens’ rights to inhabit a healthy

environment and set out the State's obligation to preserve and care for the environment and natural resources.

Article based on information from: "Reserva de la biosfera del Sur Este de Nicaragua en Peligro por concesión Minera", Aldo Palacios, distributed by the Network of Environmental Journalists, Case: Expansion of Mining concessions and activities in Central American Territories, Humboldt Centre. http://www.humboldt.org.ni/descargas/denuncias_veredictos/veredicto%20Caso%20Centroam%E9rica%20mineria.pdf