
Mining with mercenary armies

A growing number of new corporate security operations around the world link former intelligence officers, standing armies, and death squad veterans. They go into battle for new bosses: the mineral industries.

The advent of new technologies such as computer-aided satellite mapping and the use of cyanide to extract gold have turned formerly marginal operations into potential moneymakers (for transnationals). The collapse of the Soviet Union and the signing of the global free trade agreements have opened up countries like Angola that were previously off-bounds to Western multinationals. And lastly, the availability of capital and the mitigation of risk have been ensured by the push from the international financial institutions, such as bilateral and multilateral agencies including the World Bank and the US Export-Import Bank. They are eager to provide cash and political risk insurance for private resource extraction projects pretty much anywhere in the world.

Some years ago, Tim Spicer, former member of the British Special Air Services (SAS), had met with two senior government officials about buying a copper mine owned by Rio Tinto, the Anglo-Australian mining titan, on the island of Bougainville, Papua New Guinea. Less than a month later, Spicer was led into a Papua New Guinea court for being contracted with the disgraced government to provide a mercenary force to take over the copper mine. His mission had been to defeat a small group of freedom fighters who had shut down the copper mine for almost a decade. When news of Spicer's contract became public, ordinary citizens and local army officers took the law into their own hands. The rioting closed shops, banks and schools and sealed off major roads until truckloads of police armed with automatic rifles eventually dispersed the enraged populace with teargas and rubber bullets (see WRM Bulletin N° 7).

Two unnamed ex-SAS officers in Colombia fared better. Their black boxes full of guns and ammunition had been waved through the checkpoint run by a colleague, Bill Nixon, a former British intelligence officer, whose new job was providing security at the private airport owned by British Petroleum (BP). All three mercenaries had been on contract to BP to help train the Colombian police --notorious for their human rights abuses-- to protect the Dele-B oil rig. The oil company interpreted security concerns broadly. According to a report commissioned by the Colombian government, BP collaborated with local soldiers involved in kidnappings, torture, and murder. The unpublished document alleges that the oil company compiled intelligence --including photos and video tapes of local people protesting oil activities-- and passed the information on to the Colombian military which then arrested or kidnapped demonstrators as "subversives."

Most of the men running the mercenary-for-hire operations tend to operate behind the lines, preferring to employ other men --local or imported hired guns-- to carry out on-the-ground operations. Both the Colombian and Papua New Guinean contracts were handled out of London offices run by yet more former SAS officers, such as Anthony Buckingham, who is one of the shadier operators in the security business, running a mini-conglomerate of mercenary, oil, and mining companies out of discreet offices in London.

The most infamous mercenary army contracted by the new colonialists is Executive Outcomes (EO) which provided Buckingham and Spicer with soldiers-for-hire in Papua New Guinea. But EO's most famous campaign was in Sierra Leone in May 1996. The EO mercenaries arrived in Sierra Leone better equipped than most armies in Africa, with Russian helicopter gunships, a radio intercept system, two Boeing 727s to transport troops and supplies, an Andover casualty-evacuation aircraft, and fuel-air explosives. Used with devastating results by the US in the Gulf war, fuel-air explosives --one step below nuclear weapons in power-- suck out oxygen upon detonation, killing all life within a square-mile radius. The operation left EO with a lucrative security contract financed by the profits earned by the diamond mines.

But they are by no means the only major players. There are at least a few dozen others in the mineral industries, which provide "security" services to companies and governments in Colombia, Guyana, and Venezuela in South America; to Guinea, Liberia, Nigeria, and Sierra Leone in West Africa; to Angola; and Namibia in southern Africa; to former Zaire in central Africa; to Sudan and Uganda in East Africa; to Papua New Guinea and Indonesia in the Pacific; and to Kazakhstan in Central Asia. Many of these recruits are veterans of South Africa's 32 Battalion and Civil Cooperation Bureau which were the most notorious units of the old apartheid forces until elections brought a multi-racial government to power a few years ago.

Meanwhile, UK-based mining company Rio Tinto in Indonesia has made efforts to convince the world of its commitment to human rights. For the past two years, it has contributed funds to the Yap Thiam Hien Human Rights Award. This year, the award was won by human rights defender and poet Wiji Thukul, who has been missing since 1996. In December, the family refused the award on the grounds that Rio Tinto was involved in several human rights violations at its mining operations in Indonesia and was responsible for the 1992 arrest of demonstrators who were demanding proper compensation for the use of their land.

In a statement supporting the family's stance, Indonesian NGOs JATAM, WALHI and TATR list some of the human rights violations involving Rio Tinto, including those at the PT KEM mine in East Kalimantan, investigated by Indonesia's National Human Rights Commission in 1999 and 2000. These covered cases of sexual abuse and rape against sixteen women between the ages of nine and eighteen; the arrest of 15 demonstrators in 1992 and the subsequent death of one of them; forced eviction by the Indonesian military of traditional miners and burning of hundreds of houses between 1982 and 1991. The statement also lists Rio Tinto's involvement in cases through its shareholdings in the Freeport Indonesia copper and gold mine in West Papua (Rio Tinto has a 15% share); the Kaltim Prima Coal mine (co-owned with BP); Papua New Guinea's Lihir gold mine and the Panguna mine on Bougainville. The statement calls on the executors of the Yap Thiam Hien Award Program no longer to accept funding from human rights violators. "The human rights violators must not be given the opportunity to wash themselves clean of responsibility for their actions..."

Article based on information from: "Militarization & Minerals Tour", Project Underground, <http://www.moles.org/ProjectUnderground/mil/intro.shtml> ; "Rio Tinto: practise what you preach!", Down to Earth No. 56, February 2003, <http://dte.gn.apc.org/56rio.htm>