# Peru: Public consultation says NO to mining in Tambogrande

Many Latin American governments, in order to obtain income and satisfy the conditions of the IMF structural adjustment programmes, and supported by World Bank loans, have placed the natural resources of their country at the disposal of multinational companies, and grant concessions to those, who at any cost, wish to perpetuate the exploitation model to their own benefit. Many Latin American peoples have also understood that if they get organised they can defend their lands, their forests and their very survival.

Such is the case with the grant made in 1999 by President Fujimori (currently in Japan after having had to flee from the Peruvian justice) of 89,000 hectares of land to the company Manhattan Sechura S.A. (a subsidiary of Canadian company Manhattan Minerals Corp.), to install an open-cast poly-metal exploitation. Various agricultural and peasant communities in Tambogrande, in the fertile valley of San Lorenzo in the Department of Piura, would see their right to a healthy and productive environment threatened if such a project were to go through.

Mining, and particularly open-cast mining, can occupy and destroy wide areas of land. Over the past decades, most mining prospecting has affected forest ecosystems and represents the second largest threat (following commercial logging) to primary forests on a world-wide scale. Not only are the forests eliminated to give way to mining activities, but additionally, in their construction and provision of energy, mines use large amounts of timber from the surrounding forests. Like the rest of the environment, forests can also “die” when they are exposed to toxic pollutants, acid rain from the treatment facilities and asphyxia from the dust from processing plants. The carob tree (Prosopis) forests in Tambogrande provide over 50% of their income to the inhabitants of the area, as we pointed out in our Bulletin 49 in August 2001.

Over this time, the communities have organised themselves to oppose the project, in the conviction that it will have very serious social and environmental repercussions. It is well known that even under monitored conditions, disasters occur very frequently, more than in any other industrial process. Mining exploitation is fundamentally an unsustainable activity, as it is based on the extraction of non-renewable mineral concentrations, which were built up over millions of years. Once extracted, the minerals cannot be replaced and the disruption caused to the environment produces permanent change and damage. While the more easily accessible mining deposits are becoming depleted, the great anxiety to find new sources of cheap minerals is promoting industry to intensify prospecting in indigenous territories and in environmentally sensitive zones.

Mining companies are also developing new techniques that enable them to obtain profit from the treatment of lower quality deposits. This change may imply that mining will become even more invasive and environmentally noxious than before. The treatment of those deposits requires opening up increasingly large mines, affecting increasingly larger areas and the creation and dumping of unprecedented amounts of mining waste. The cost of these losses is borne by the affected zones, communities and governments, rather than by the companies themselves.

One of the most active organisations during the opposition, the Frente de Defensa del Valle de San

Lorenzo y Tambogrande (The Front for the Defence of the Valley of San Lorenzo and Tambogrande) has dialogued with representatives of the Peruvian State, with the Manhattan Sechura Mining Company and with various Peruvian and foreign officials, informing them of their concern over the social and environmental impact of a possible mining exploitation in Tambogrande, one of the regions of the country with the highest agricultural production. It is in the mining zones of Peru that the highest poverty and unemployment rates are to be found. Over this period too, the members of the organisation and their families have been the victims of attempts, abductions and threats of death. So far, after one year, the authorities have not been able to clarify the murder of one of the environmental leaders opposing the project and technically advising the Front, Mr. Godofredo Garcia Baca.

The local communities, supported by international organisations, have achieved the holding of a neighbourhood consultation on Sunday 2nd June, convened by the District Municipality, giving the population the opportunity to voice their views on the mining exploitation. Opposition was impressive. Although the consultation was voluntary, participation was very high, greater than in national elections: 74% of the residents of Tambogrande took part. Out of the votes, 98.05% stated their opposition to the mining project.

In spite of the fact that Peruvian, Italian, Swiss, Canadian, German and U.S. observers attended, verifying that the population participated freely and with no coercion, those in favour of the exploitation have stated that the neighbourhood consultation was an illegal action.

The residents of Tambogrande have not only ratified their rejection of the mining enterprise and the false development that it offers, but have also shown an example of how organised society can defend its resources and the right to choose its form of subsistence in a democratic way.

In the framework of the present wave of violence triggered off by the sale of public entities that the current President had promised --during his electoral campaign-- not to privatise, it would be advisable for the government to start listening more to the people and to its demands than to those of the IMF, the World Bank and corporations. If they were to do so, in the case of Tambogrande, they would have recognised the evidence and ordered cancellation of the mining project, democratically rejected by the wide majority of the local population.

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