
Costa Rica: Canadian mining company attempts to silence opposition

Once again, a foreign company is the cause of conflicts for the inhabitants of the Province of Puntarenas. The Río Minerales company, a subsidiary of the transnational Canadian mining company Wheaton River Minerals Ltd. was granted environmental permits to establish an open cast gold mine at Bellavista de Miramar, for the extraction of 60 thousand ounces of gold per year over a 7 year period, by means of leaching in ponds, using cyanide.

Open cast mining is an industrial activity with high environmental, social and cultural impacts. It is also by definition, an unsustainable activity, insofar as the exploitation of the resource involves its depletion. It uses large amounts of cyanide, a very toxic substance, in order to separate the gold from the other materials removed.

In order to develop this process, the beds need to cover large areas near the surface, resulting in gigantic craters that can be as large as 150 hectares and over 500 metres deep. The consequences are: the production of large amounts of solid and liquid wastes, impacts on neighbouring peoples and the complete transformation of the landscape together with severe modifications to the morphology of the land (for more detailed information in Spanish on the environmental and social impacts of gold mining, see: http://semueve.netfirms.com/arch_minas/mineria_links.htm#articulos).

Knowing the serious impacts caused by open cast mining, Marta Ligia Blanco Rodríguez, teacher and community counsellor from Montes de Oca, province of Puntarenas, declared herself against the Río Minerales company activities, as did the mayor, Roberto Aguilar and the other community leaders. For Marta Blanco, this project compromises their source of water and the right to a sustainable life in her canton. As a result of her opposition, she is presently facing legal action lodged by the mining company. The power of the Canadian company seems to be so great that in September 1999 it was exempt from carrying out an Environmental Impact Assessment (with the excuse that an assessment had been approved in 1986), and it was only required to submit an Environmental Management Plan.

According to the inhabitants of the zone, the action against Marta Blanco is clearly meant to intimidate and reflects the power of the transnational companies, responding to vested interests in mining exploitation, interests that are of course not those of the Montes de Oca community. This statement is confirmed when Río Minerales lodged the action for “defamation of a legal person” sustaining that the counsellor has attributed responsibility to the company for “logging thousands of trees,” an accusation the company rejects, because it has an excavating permit.

The company also alleges that the policy of Marta Blanco and her companions from the Council is “to oppose all projects.” For her part, counsellor Blanco has the support of the community neighbours who do not want an open cast mine to be established. During an attempt at conciliation, the mining company wanted the counsellor to resign to avoid her and the Municipal Council continuing their opposition to the mine being opened. This failed as it showed to be a clear attempt at limiting the municipal representatives’ freedom of expression.

Sonia Torres, a neighbour at Miramar, stated that this case is framed within the policies transnational companies follow with people in any part of the world who oppose their interests. "Four years ago I was also sentenced by this same court for not having given in to intimidation by the employees of Posesiones Gran Galaxie S.A., a subsidiary company of the Canadian mining company Rayrock, the owner of the Bellavista mining project at that time."

It seems that these companies have got used to bringing to court those who exercise freedom of expression in defence of the environment, health and life in Costa Rica. Is it not time for the government of this country, apparently so concerned by environmental issues, to place itself on the side of those who are defending the environment, and to stop the expansion of these destructive mining activities?

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