
Gold fever threatens forests and people in Suriname

The relatively untouched areas occupied by rainforests in Suriname -source of a rich biodiversity and ancestral homeland for thousands of Indigenous peoples and Maroons, descendants from ancient African slaves- are threatened by the increase of mining concessions that the Government is granting to foreign companies.

Plans of Canadian mining companies Golden Star Resources and Cambior Inc. to mine gold in the Gross Rosebel concession, call for the relocation of the Maroon of Nieuw Koffiekamp, which is strongly resisted by that community. Since 1994, when the construction of the mining camp began, Golden Star has been denying them access to their gardens, hunting and fishing areas. A negotiation process is being carried out, but the Government and the companies would not consider the will of the community to stay in their lands. Only a resettlement agreement is to be negotiated. The basic reason for this is that Suriname is the only country in the Western Hemisphere that does not legally recognize some form of traditional land tenure. "Our lands are of fundamental importance for our survival as Indigenous and Tribal peoples. Without the land, forest and rivers there are no trees, birds, animals and fish and we as Indigenous and Maroon peoples will not be able to survive" declared a Gran Krutu (Great Gathering) of Indigenous and Maroon leaders held in November 1996.

Golden Star and Cambior's background is not good at all: they were partners in the infamous OMAI mine in Guyana, that dumped 3-4 million litres of cyanide and heavy metal wastes into the Essequibo River when a dam ruptured in August 19, 1995. This is considered one of the worst mine disasters in history. Golder Associates of Toronto and Rescan of Vancouver, respectively responsible for the building of the failed dam at OMAI and the Environmental Impact Assessment of the Project, will also take part in the Gross Rosebel Project. As a matter of fact, the possibility of State control is inexistent since Suriname does not have any environmental protection law and the Government lacks any monitoring capacity. Thus the population of Suriname and especially its forest peoples are forced to rely upon self-monitoring and self-regulation of two companies that have proved to be completely unreliable in this respect. Moreover David Fagin, Chairman of Golden Star, has even stated that his company "has looked increasingly at the Guyana Shield because of the increased pressure from environmentalists and the government in the United States", where Golden Star is based.

This company has also formed a joint venture with Broken Hill Property, an Australian mining giant, to explore the Tapanahogany and Tempati concessions. BHP's background does not look very clean either: it has had disputes with Aboriginal peoples in Australia and has caused environmental degradation in other parts of the world, for instance, the dumping of toxic wastes that occurred in Ok Tedi copper mine in Papua New Guinea and the dispute for territorial rights with the community of Santa Rosa in Guyana.

Finally a third case: the acquisition of three new mining concessions in the Brokopondo District by the Canadian Canarc Resource Corp, that has become one of the largest strategic mineral landholdings in Suriname. The Maroon communities affected by these concessions were previously neither informed nor consulted. Canarc's activities in the Baramita region of Guyana -where it worked associated with Echo Bay- brought it into conflict with local Indigenous peoples. As for Echo Bay it

received a heavy fine under the US Migratory Birds Treaty Act for poisoning birds with cyanide at McCoy Clove mine in Nevada.

Source: Forest Peoples Programme, July 1997