

"DURING THE LAST 500 YEARS, MINING HAS BEEN, MORE THAN ANY OTHER HUMAN ACTIVITY, THAT WHICH HAS TRANSFORMED THE ECOSYSTEM OF LATIN AMERICA"

-ELIZABETH DORE (MEXICAN RESEARCHER)



More than twenty five years after the Ngöbe-Buglé (Guaymí) people first raised their voices in protest over the imminent danger that the Cerro Colorado mining project presented to the region's social, cultural and environmental life, the same ghost of gold and copper fever has returned to haunt the region.

Ghosts of Cerro Colorado Mining Project continue to haunt the Ngöbe-Buglé

◆ *by Anelio Merry López*

Without taking into account the Ngöbe-Buglé's historic rights as original inhabitants of the region's mountains, rivers and streams, the Panamanian government signed a new contract in 1996 with the mining company Panacobre S.A. for the exploration of Cerro Colorado, known to the Ngöbes as 'Ngüduo Tain'. This mountain is considered by geologists to be one of the

12 largest copper deposits in the world.

The various Indigenous communities surrounding the 75,000 hectares granted to Panacobre would be directly affected if the mining exploitation were to begin. During mining operations in the 1970s, communities were alarmed when the San Felix River, which originates at the base of the Cerro Colorado, brought thick mud down from the mountain contaminating other rivers and streams.

It is very probable that these waterways will be used to transport waste and toxic substances from mining sites which will undoubtedly affect the health of the Indigenous communities as well as the great diversity of animals that use the river daily.

The concerns of the Ngöbe-Buglé, of the peasant and social organizations, the church, human rights organizations and of the community in general, stem not only from previous experiences with mining at Cerro Colorado (which caused enormous environmental damage to the region) but also from experiences with other similar projects.

During the time when the San Felix River experienced contamination, negative environmental impacts were registered, including the appearance of dead fish, shrimp and other species along the river's shores. The river became so polluted that people were forced to stop bathing in its waters. The transnational corporations together with the national government worked to promote the mining project under the guise of development and progress and to generate an air of confusion among the Ngöbe-Buglé population.

After the San Felix River disaster an evaluation was conducted to assess the project's impact on the Ngöbe-Buglé. The tests were only carried out for two months, an insufficient period of time to draw any meaningful conclusions. The mining project itself, however will take anywhere from 25 to 50 years.

One of the largest impacts that renewed mining at Cerro Colorado will have on the local Indigenous people is loss of vast tracts of land which would further strain land rights issue in the region. With increased mining exploitation in the area, some Indigenous communities will undoubtedly be forced to relocate. According to Panacobre S.A., those affected by relocation will receive "just" reimbursements and will be allowed to return to their lands once the operation is finished.

It is estimated that in the Cerro Colorado area there are 1,380 million metric tons of copper mixed with traces of molybdenum, gold, silver, as well great quantities of sulfur found in pyrite. Annually, the mining project would extract 113 million metric tons of rock from Cerro Colorado out of an open air mine pit. The 26 million metric tons of waste produced by this extraction and transported in pipes toward the coast, does not include the waste produced during the processing of the minerals.

Rivers near the mine, like the Cuibora and the Tabasará will most likely provide the great quantity of water required for the large-scale mining exploitation. These rivers may also be used to construct a dam, as has been previously planned.

The Ngöbe-Buglé pointed out in testimony that "the construction of highways has created dangerous consequences, for example, the earth removed during the dry season due to the construction of the highway from Hato Chami to Nancito was washed into the rivers and streams by the rains which prevented the local communities from crossing. Landslides caused by the mining exploitation are also a threat.

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The Panacobre mining corporation has announced that after completing its pre-feasibility studies it has begun its feasibility studies in order to determine the construction costs of mining installations and later operations. These studies include a social and environmental impact report undertaken by two consultancy firms. The first being a Canadian firm, Hallam Knight Piesold and the other a Panamanian company, Panamanian Ecological Consultants

(Consultores Panamenos Ecologicos, S.A). The report, now in its second phase, includes the study of riverflows, the quality of water, the flora, vegetation, cultural characteristics of the areas' inhabitants and the fertility of the land.

Panacobre will employ mining technologies known as "lixiviacion en pilas", "solvent extraction" and "electro-deposition" which according to them are safe and environmentally sound

processes. During this new mining procedure, the rock fragments will be sprayed with a water and sulfuric acid solution which will travel in a closed maze of tanks and tubes, then the mixture will be passed on to a second tank where an organic solution will be added which separates copper. Finally, the mixture will be sent to a fourth tank where it will receive electrical charges to dislodge the copper onto a metal slab.

According to a communiqué from the Commission of Indigenous Affairs of the Legislative Assembly of Panama, as well as many other communiqués demanding the suspension of the project, mining at Cerro Colorado "represents a serious threat to the Ngöbe-Buglé people from the physical, social, cultural and environmental standpoint."

In the past year, various sectors have organized to battle against mining projects which threaten human and environmental survival, particularly the health of Indigenous people. Some examples of local organizing include: the Santeno Front Against Mining (Frente Santeno Contra la Minería) which was created in the Province of Los Santos last May; the National Front Against Mining (Frente Nacional de Lucha Contra la Minería) was founded in June in the Province of Panama; the Indigenous and Peasant Front Against Mining of Alto Bayano (the Frente Indígena y Campesino de Alto Bayano Contra la Minería) was formed last August in the Kuna community of Ibedi in Alto Bayano and the Province of Veraguas Front Against Mining (Provincia de Veraguas Frente Veraguense Contra la Minería) was also founded last August.

Mining activity has always been and continues to be a serious threat to the survival of Indigenous peoples. Mineral exploitation inevitably disrupts the unique symbiotic relationship which Indigenous people have with the land. Despite advanced technologies and impact assessment evaluations, there is no guarantee that these projects will not affect the ecosystem, the environment or its people. Mining is continually promoted as an alternative development that will benefit the Indigenous people in the area, when in reality the communities face relocation and displacement from their native land, and a host of illness which are an inevitable consequence of polluting mining activities.

The author is a Kuna journalist who has contributed to numerous periodicals and publications and has co-produced various radio programs about Kuna issues. He also works with the Movimiento de la Juventud Kuna (Kuna Youth Movement).

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