

Mining and social conflicts in Latin America

Via [ContraHegemonia](#)

From Argentina to Honduras, communities are resisting the expansion of mining in Latin America, carried out by British, Canadian and Chinese companies. The Observatory of Mining Conflicts in Latin America (OCMAL) registers 284 “social conflicts” over mining. Most are in Mexico, Chile and Peru, followed by Argentina, Brazil and Colombia. Behind these figures are people. And behind each of them, a family and a community.



According to the latest report from NGO Global Witness, more environmental activists are murdered in Latin America than in any other region of the world, with two-thirds of the cases in 2019. Colombia tops this horrifying list, with 64 murders.

The Observatory of Mining Conflicts in Latin America (OCMAL) records 284 “social conflicts” over mining. Most are in Mexico, Chile and Peru, followed by Argentina, Brazil and Colombia. Behind these figures are people. And behind each of them, a family and a community.

Despite the growing influx of Chinese capital and the

significant presence of British companies, more than half of the companies driving mining in Latin America are still owned by Canadian companies.

Such is the case of the Fénix mine on the northern shore of Lake Izabal in Guatemala, located in territories claimed by the Q'eqchi Mayan community. The dispute with the local community gave rise to three lawsuits in the Ontario Superior Court of Justice for allegations against the Canadian companies HudBay Minerals and HMI Nickel, and their subsidiary CGN.

The first of these lawsuits relates to the alleged sexual abuse of 11 women on January 17, 2007 by police, military and security personnel dressed in CGN mining company clothing during the eviction of a hundred families from the Lote Ocho community. The case is still ongoing.

One of the victims, Rosa Elbira Coc Ich, said that nine men broke into her house asking for her husband and then raped her. Today she is unable to have children, possibly due to the injuries she suffered. Other victims include pregnant women who lost their babies.

During the trial, the mining companies were required to hand over some 20,000 internal documents to the plaintiff, Grahame Russell, director of Rights Action, one of the NGOs working with affected communities. He said, "There is evidence that CGN paid hundreds of thousands of dollars to soldiers and police to carry out the evictions."

The company denies the allegations.

Strategy of attrition

Canadian Pan American Silver is another of the region's flagship companies, with a presence in five countries. In Mexico it operates two projects, including La Colorada, in Zacatecas, the company's largest mine. It was inaugurated in

2004 and a decade later began an expansion process that sparked a land use conflict with local residents.

On January 13, 2017, Pan American Silver security personnel armed with guns forced 46 families to vacate the land their community had occupied for nearly a century. Their homes were destroyed and they were all relocated to tin houses that were borrowed, within a housing complex located 200 meters from the entrance to the mine.

The neighbors say that it is all part of a strategy of attrition to force them to leave the area, which began when the mining company fired the employees who lived in the community. They add that they cannot even celebrate a birthday outside their homes and that no noise is allowed after 11 pm.

Merry Christmas?

Pan American Silver is now trying to move forward in Chubut, in southern Argentina, with the Navidad project. But this has been subject to alleged allegations of corruption by the local community, including the case of a provincial deputy who was covertly recorded asking for money to lobby on Pan American Silver's behalf. The deputy said the video was recorded before he took office.

Open pit mining and the use of cyanide are prohibited in the province of Chubut, following a referendum in the town of Esquel in 2003. This means that for the project to go ahead the local legislature would first have to reauthorize mining in the province. The government has already sent a bill to the legislature.

In total, OCMAL has counted 39 popular consultations on mining in the region, but they are concentrated in only six countries. However, governments have not always recognized these votes and have sometimes used legal instruments to circumvent their results. Many have succeeded in modifying, delaying or even halting projects.

Another form of direct participation is prior consultation, but this is usually a mere formality. In Honduras, there was a local government open session in 2019 to discuss the ASP1 and ASP mining sites of Inversiones Los Pinares. It was attended by more than 3,500 people, who agreed to declare the area free of mining. The company, however, said the outcome “in no way affects” its operations.

“We ran up against a terrible wall at all levels: municipality, central government and company,” recalls Juan Antonio López, a resident of Tocoa, in northern Honduras, and an opponent of the mining project.

The conflict in Honduras began in April 2018, during the construction of access roads to the mine. The dust produced when clearing a road for access roads is often the first telltale sign of a mining company’s arrival in earnest. At the binational Pascua Lama project between Chile and Argentina, Chilean authorities stopped work because they detected the presence of a layer of dust on two glaciers.

Back in Honduras, dust was visible in the Guapinol and San Pedro rivers and their tributaries. “The water looked like tamarind juice,” residents recall. This mobilized communities that had not previously protested.

Villagers took over the municipal building for two weeks. They blocked the access road to the company and stopped the activity. They called for dialogue with the government, but the authorities invited them to negotiate a financial agreement with the company. “They even told us that the state was not responsible for what could happen to us,” recalls López.

During one of the many protests, a gunshot from a company vehicle injured a protester, according to residents’ accounts of the events. The company denies this. Residents reacted by kidnapping the mine’s security chief, who was later handed

over to the police. The State's response was to initiate criminal proceedings against 18 residents.

In February 2019, 14 other people were charged. They were accused of committing six crimes, including illicit association.

A recent Mongabay investigation found that between Peru, Colombia, Mexico and Ecuador, 156 environmental defenders have been "criminalized," 58 of them for conflicts related to mega-mining.

This story is republished from a journalism project led by Journalists for the Planet (PxP) and is reproduced under a Creative Commons License.

Source: NO TO THE MINE