

In Ecuador, Mass Mobilizations against Mining Confront President Correa

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In Ecuador, thousands of indigenous, *campesinos*, Afro-descendants and environmentalists took to the streets on Monday, protesting the pending mining law and government failure to fully apply a mining mandate passed by the National Constituent Assembly in April.

With strong turnout in five different parts of the country, the day of action was an important demonstration of growing social movement unity and independence from the government of President Rafael Correa. Activists call Monday's mobilization the beginning of a broader movement to confront Correa's environmental policies. The Ecuadorian Left has increasingly distanced itself from the government after broadly supporting the approval of a new constitution in September.

In Quito, hundreds of people from rural communities threatened by mining throughout Ecuador's Northern highlands, especially from the northwestern area of Intag, participated. Intag has blocked the entrance of mining companies since the early 1990s and is currently fighting the Canadian-financed transnational Ascendant Copper.

Jose Cueva, a community leader from Intag, said, "They need to shelve the mining law. The President needs to first pass a food sovereignty law, a water law and a biodiversity law. Then we can have a national dialogue over what to do about mining."

Metal mining has been promoted in Ecuador since the early nineties, however, no large-scale project has yet to reach production.

Growing alliances were in evidence as hundreds of coastal *campesinos* or *montubios* and Afro-Ecuadorians joined anti-mining activists in Quito, protesting Correa's support large-scale industrial shrimp farming.

In the southern highlands city of Cuenca, the country's third largest, some 600 people participated.

The march, which wove through the colonial city streets, was led by the Unified Community Water Systems of Azuay (UNAGUAS) and the Federation of Campesino Organizations. More than nine rural communities were represented.

These communities are directly affected by various mining concessions in the hands of companies such as Toronto-based IAMGOLD, as well as other companies listed on Toronto Stock Exchange, including International Minerals, Andean Gold and Channel Resources.

A member of the rural water system from Victoria-Tarqui said, "We have come out in defense of water which is life for the entire country. It is Correa's fault that we are out here. We are defending the wetlands of Quimsacocha, our water."

Around 700 campesinos from the province of Cañar also marched through the city of Azogues and along the Pan American Highway.

President Rafael Correa has declared that large-scale metal mining is necessary to pay for newly expanded social programs. He insists that Ecuador is pursuing economically, environmentally and socially responsible mining. Having presented the new mining bill to the interim legislative commission late Friday, he threatened a national referendum on mining if legislators make significant changes to the draft.

In recent weeks, the President has called anti-mining activists the biggest threat to his political project and promised to clamp down on protests. Insults directed at anti-mining activists have been repeatedly broadcast on local radio stations in Cuenca.

But Monday's mass demonstrations showed that activists are not deterred.

Rigoberto Sanchez, treasurer for the rural water system of the Portete River in Girón, stated, "The new mining law goes against our rights, because there are articles that say that leaders against mining companies will be criminalized. How can it be that people who are fighting for the defense of life, of that vital liquid, be tried and jailed?"

Other activists expressed concerns that their right to water, right to live in a healthy environment and right to Sumak Kawsay - or well being in balance with nature - will be endangered by the mining bill should it become law. The bill allows for mining to occur in headwaters and wetlands, protected areas and populated centers. Community input would not be binding.

In Santa Isabel about an hour south of Cuenca, protesters successfully blocked an important highway for 12 hours after reaching an agreement with police.

Over 700 people participated in the blockade, according to a local organizer, with participation from all four counties represented by the Inter County Coordinator, a leading opponent of large-scale mining. Protesters demanded that high altitude wetlands (*páramo*) be protected from mining and that the government respect freedom of expression and the right to protest.

A large banner hung across a horizontally parked truck blockading the highway: "What is worth more: water and land, or gold and copper? *Señor Presidente*, the answer is obvious and convincing."

In the Southern Amazonian Province of Zamora Chinchipe, activists blocked two highway junctures and five people were violently detained by public security forces. Those arrested included current national legislative commission member Jorge Sarango, a member of the indigenous Pachakutik party. Several others were hospitalized with injuries.

In Quito, the demonstrators marched to the presidential palace, Carondelet, demanding to speak to Correa. When Correa refused to address the crowd, the march moved on to the legislature. The police tried to block protesters from entering the street in front of Congress. After using pepper spray and clubs in an attempt to keep the crowd back, protesters overwhelmed the police and marched to the building's gates.

In a significant move, Jorge Escala, a legislator and leader from the Popular Democratic Movement (MPD), joined Pachakutik legislator Gilberto Guamangate, in addressing protesters outside of Congress. Escala declared that the MPD would oppose the Mining Law if Correa refused to open a national debate on the matter. The MPD has been closely aligned with the Correa government over the past year and has been criticized for what some see as opportunism.

During demonstrations in the southern cities of Azogues and Cuenca, provincial governors also made appearances. In Cañar, the governor denied that mineral concessions had been awarded in the province. In Azuay, the national government representative offered to bring members of the Ecuadorian Legislative Commission to visit IAMGOLD's contentious Quimsacocha project.

The protest in Cuenca concluded with a special ceremony led by Lautro Villevincencio, a representative of the Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador (CONAIE), to strengthen the spirit of the river.

Activists called Monday's demonstration the beginning of increasing social movement challenges to Correa's social and environmental policies. Environmentalist, rural and indigenous organizations have promised to continue mobilizing until Correa follows through on his pledge for social and economic justice.

This Wednesday, over ten thousand highland indigenous people are expected to protest in support of their proposal for a new water law. They will also express their opposition to the Mining Law.