

## **Life or mining**

### **Communities affected by mining lobby Ecuador's National Assembly**

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Last Wednesday, the 9<sup>th</sup> Dialogue for Life organized by the National Coordinating Committee for the Defense of Life and Sovereignty took place in Montecristi, where Ecuador's National Constituent Assembly will draft the country's 20<sup>th</sup> constitution. Delegations arrived to this coastal town from the Southern Provinces of Azuay, Cañar, El Oro, Morona Santiago, and Zamora Chinchipe. Also present were representatives from Intag in Northern Imbabura Province, as well as the Central Highland Provinces of Chimborazo, Tungurahua and Bolívar.

Prior to meeting with the assembly, delegates gathered in a central park to publicly reiterate their demands and to receive an address from the President of the National Constituent Assembly, the Economist Alberto Acosta. They spent the rest of the day in meetings with various working committees of the Assembly.

### **No to large scale mining**

Speaking from the bandshell in a small park in Montecristi, Lina Solano, President of the National Coordinating Committee, read a letter prepared for Acosta. It demanded the immediate departure of transnational mining corporations from Ecuador, claiming in particular that companies have failed to consult with communities in accordance with the political constitution of 1998. Following from this, she insisted that large scale mining activities be prohibited based upon their social and environmental impacts, requesting that measures also be taken to address related criminalization and human rights violations that have taken place in communities across the country as a result of current conflicts.

Acosta responded with an impassioned address that received the support of the audience. He reiterated his support for an Ecuador free of large scale, open-pit metallic mining particularly in protected areas, and said that the new constitution should set guidelines for mining in Ecuador "so that the current situation will not be repeated again." He said this framework should include real processes for prior community consultation in which "the community has to say yes or no."

### **Assembly Mandate on Mining**

Continuing, Acosta emphasized that all Ecuadorians need to understand what is going on with mining in the country. He made reference to the more than 4,000 existing mineral concessions, pointing out that some coincide with the central plaza and church of communities. Several, he added, "are practically territories in the hands of transnational corporations," referring to those held by Canadian companies Ecuacorriente and Aurelian Resources which are tens of thousands of hectares.

Large scale metallic mining projects in Ecuador have not yet advanced to production, but are being considered by the government as an important source of national revenue in the years to come. However, Acosta announced that the National Constituent Assembly would soon release a mandate in this respect which is anticipated to revoke "the majority, if not all of the current mineral concessions."

The mandate is not anticipated to apply to at least four major mining projects in the south of the country, including those being developed by IAMGOLD and IMC in the Province of Azuay and Ecuacorrientes and Aurelian Resources in the Provinces of Morona Santiago and Zamora Chinchipe.

Acosta also qualified the mandate, saying that its impact will only be long-term if ratified as part of the new constitution. Ecuadorians are expected to vote on the new text in July. Following from this, he said, he supports revising the mining law to regulate small scale, non-metallic and potentially underground mining operations in Ecuador. Several large scale metallic mining projects in Ecuador have been designated as underground operations rather than open-pit, including those of Aurelian and IAMGOLD.

### **No with proposals**

Reflecting on Acosta's speech, Robinson Guachagmira, a 24 year old campesino from Intag, who has been involved in the struggle against large-scale mining since he was 12, says he is hopeful about the changes they could achieve through the National Constituent Assembly. They've had several opportunities to speak with the Assembly President, also former Minister of Energy and Mines within the Correa government, and feels like they have made advances toward having the proposals of campesinos and small-scale producers taken into consideration.

Guachagmira, current secretary of Intag's Agro-Ecological Campesino Association (ACAI), adds that "We aren't just saying no to mining. In Intag," he elaborates, "we are working with alternative proposals...toward a form of development that also takes care of the environment." They would like to see "new laws developed in favour of small producers and of campesinos," he says, "not just of those with great economic power." He's optimistic that people like Acosta are open to these possibilities and that "as the new constitution takes shape that it will respond to [their] real needs."

The proposal presented by the National Coordinating Committee to the National Constituent Assembly envisions a new model for Ecuador based upon food sovereignty and water, in particular, as basic rights. They see a future in which their communities are dedicated to sustainable forms of agro-ecology and press for the government's commitment to resolve current conflicts which are compromising local processes of organization, development and day-to-day life.

### **A process in construction**

The National Constituent Assembly, composed of 130 members, meets on the hill overlooking Montecristi in an area called "The City of Alfaro," in reference to the past president Eloy Alfaro. Five of ten working groups received presentations from the National Coordinating Committee for Life and Sovereignty including Natural Resources and Biodiversity; the Development Regime; Work, Production and Social Inclusion; Legislation and Public Prosecution; and Fundamental Rights and Constitutional Guarantees. Working committees will receive proposals and delegations from a variety of sectors into February.

Several members of the Natural Resources and Biodiversity working committee, charged in particular with examining mining in Ecuador, responded to the National Coordinating Committee. This group is also responsible for themes of petroleum, biodiversity, water and forests. One member acknowledged that mining companies have disregarded constitutional rights of communities to consultation or haven't presented adequate environmental impact assessments. Another specifically asked the committee to return with further proposals for financing and national economic alternatives in place of mining.

Monica Chuji, President of the committee and former Secretary of Communications for the Correa Government, said that the presentation was one of many contributions they would receive and seek out. She said that in February, members would travel the country in order to talk with a variety of constituencies. A member of the Kichwa nationality from Sarayacu in the Amazonian Province of Pastaza, Chuji also credited the indigenous movement in Ecuador for being a critical actor in putting environmental concerns and respect for Mother Earth on the national agenda. She concluded saying that she sees it as part of their commitment to develop a new constitution which “guarantees Ecuadorians a healthy environment and respect for both individual and collective rights.”

### **Success with a sense of urgency**

Wrapping up nearly a year of organizing at the national level, the National Coordinating Committee for the Defense of Life and Sovereignty declared the day a success. However, their petitions to Alberto Acosta and the National Constituent Assembly were delivered with a sense of urgency.

Partly driving their appeals are strong indications that the Correa government wants to advance development of the sector and develop a national mining company. The Ministry of Mines and Petroleum has also recently announced that it will resume its own National Mining Dialogue with communities in February to discuss the Mining Law. It met with industry representatives in December. The reforms are anticipated to include reinstatement of royalty payments and strengthening of regulatory controls.

Communities are also aware that they have strong competition. Industry representatives have undertaken concerted lobbying efforts before both the assembly and the government. *Ecuador Mining News* reported last week that one day following presentations made by the National Coordinating Committee, a twelve member group from the industry met with various committees of the National Assembly. Representing an alliance of the Ecuadorian Chamber of Mining (CME), the National Chamber of Mining and the Chamber of Small Scale Mining, their “fundamental objective is to have a single voice before the Constituent Assembly and the Ministry of Mines and Petroleum,” reported Silvia Santacruz.

### **Mining: A litmus test**

Much remains to be seen in the coming months and while the National Coordinating Committee hopes for significant change, it recognizes that it will not be easy. Further success will be measured by actual measures taken by the Assembly and government to move Ecuador away from dependence on extractive industries, toward strengthened basic rights, and an end to criminalization of their movement and resolution of current conflicts. Until then, the itinerant Dialogue for Life continues.